

Islam and politics In Nigeria

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TOYIN FALOLA, JUL 29 2009

Many will exclaim: religious violence in Nigeria again! And the Western media has dubbed the current outbreaks as something new, with a label, "Taliban style" to connect it with its global narrative on terrorism. There was major religious violence in Jos last year, and indeed many cases before then. There will be new cases in the future. Thousands of people have lost their lives. Properties have been destroyed. Mosques and churches have been burnt. People have been forced to relocate, abandoning their long-established homes and occupations. So, why is there a recurring circle of violence? The answer lies in the history of the country, the nature of contemporary politics, and the problems of underdevelopment. Islam does not operate in a political vacuum – issues of ethnicity, power rivalry, and the ambitious search for money by politicians impact on religion itself. This brief piece will supply the context to understand the current, previous and future cases of violence.

Nigeria has one of the largest concentrations of Muslims in the world, and Islam has played a leading role in its politics. Nigeria is not an Islamic state, as it is under a democratic government with a secular constitution and the rule of law. Nevertheless, Islam is important in Nigeria, with impacts on politics and social life. Islam is an old religion, with millions subscribing to the faith. In many historical periods, Islam has served as a source of unifying force (as in the case of the Sokoto Caliphate during the nineteenth century). Islam has also contributed in many ways to Nigeria's development, notably in providing the sources to organize politics and society, fostering community cohesion, and creating an ideology of change.

Nigeria cannot be understood without Islam. The areas of intersection between Islam and politics are significant. First, the government's failure to promote development or enhance living standards will continue to make Islam an alternative "ideology" to organize change and seek better or alternative solutions to a myriad of problems. In general (as well as in different historical epochs) Islam has expressed itself as a radical religion and political ideology. Second, tensions will continue to mount in the country, and they will take various forms, including inter- and intra-religious conflicts. Within Islam, the sufi and anti-sufi conflicts are unlikely to disappear and different political parties and interest groups will seek to gain political power to further specific interests. These can even be expressed as communal clashes as in the case of religious riots. Ethnic groups that migrate, such as the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, have experienced a number of communal-cum-religious conflicts outside of their homelands. Economic decline can promote such tensions and the political class can manipulate them to its advantage. Third, Islamic leaders and Muslim organizations are very efficient and astute at building regional and international solidarity networks to push their claims and gain strength in greater numbers. As the power of traditional political authority represented by the emirs decline, there will be a weakened centralized institution to hold northern Nigeria together. Islam is the ideology that may create a semblance of unity. However, Islam can also rally together other Muslims beyond the frontiers of the north.

Is the secular state too artificial? Many Muslims will answer in the affirmative, and there are scholars who think that Nigeria alienates its citizens and pushes them to seek loyalties in religion, communities and ethnic groups. Islam will continue to be relevant to power. While the Nigerian constitution prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines, political actors will seek and consolidate power by benefiting from and manipulating several identities. These actors and their rivals will continue to use Islam and ethnicity to mobilize support. To millions of people, the daily routines of life revolve around Islamic practices and their survival in their villages and towns. The commitment to such routines and practices is strong. The agenda of the political class is to ask the people to transcend those

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routines and practices and become “nationalists,” or “federalists” or loyalists, that is, to move from an informal socio-political space to that of the public and formal. Securing the loyalty of the public will entail a great deal of propaganda work, far more than the conduct of occasional elections. For democracy to work, Nigerians divided by religion and ethnicity must be convinced that the citizenship in the same country is important to them. The demands of religious groups may make democratic institutions rather fragile. How can a Muslim living in Ibadan, a Yoruba city, or Sokoto in the North be a Muslim and a Nigerian and be loyal to both without coming into conflict with other identities and nationalities? The Nigerian political class is yet to find an appropriate answer to the problems and challenges posed by pluralism, including that of religious differences and conflicts.

Muslims and non-Muslims do not necessarily agree upon a number of major issues: the secular, or otherwise, nature of the Nigerian foundation; the distribution of federal positions to ambitious members of the political class; the continuation or not of the English legal system; the retention of Nigeria as a federal structure; and the distribution of power between the federal and states; the place of women in society and politics; the number of Nigerians and their regional distributions; the number of states and local governments in the federation, etc.

The access to and manipulation of Western education has long been a source of tension. The South had an early advantage, as Christian missionaries came via the Atlantic Ocean to evangelize and promote formal Western education. When Independence came in 1960, the South had a more educated elite than the North. To the North, this was a source of domination. This disparity fueled regionalism and attacks on Southerners. As the North established more Western-style schools, so too did the South, with the result that to date, that the South continue to have more educated people than the North. As economic opportunities shrink, the Southern educated people, especially the middle class and fresh graduates, have resorted to migrations to all parts of the world. To these migrants and to the jobless in the South, Muslims and the North have held the nation back and must be blamed for their predicament. As many Yoruba and Igbo in the South have said, their “nations” would have developed but for the inclusion of the North in Nigeria.

In reality, the South is more afraid of the North. For most of the years since independence, the North has produced the majority of the country’s leaders, leading to the political concept of “northern primacy”. The British bequeathed a northern region bigger than the South combined. After independence, the northern political class used the army to control power and distribute resources to themselves. In the 1990s, a number of politicians were developing a political theory of domination: the East should control trade, the West the civil service, and the North political power. The fear of domination gave rise to suggestions on zoning, an arrangement whereby each region, a cluster of six states, would produce the country’s president in a rotational arrangement. Also, as in the expansion of the number of federal ministries, it was suggested that the country should have many vice-presidents to represent regional interests. The consideration has to do with satisfying the political gladiators rather than the economic costs that would be consumed in the process, thus slowing down development and resulting in an inadequate resources to transform the rural areas and the peasantry.

As in all societies, people can see issues from the perspectives of location, class, religion, gender and privilege. Nigeria is a multi-plural society, with many ethnicities and languages. Religious pluralism and ethnic differences do undermine the process of building a Nigerian nation-state. But the divisions prevent or undermine equally the attempts by one group or religion to impose itself on the country. For instance, Muslims have been accused of wanting to impose Islam on Nigeria, but mobilization by southern Christians have suggested that there would be secession or warfare. Thus, while the identities create problems to forge an enduring nation, they nevertheless also create the basis for negotiations between Muslims and Christians, southerners and northerners, the modern and the traditional elite. Ethnic-cum-communal identities are strong, and they can complement or differ from the religious. Many nations had existed and flourished before the British imposition of colonial rule. While the nations have been amalgamated, the concept of a nation-state governed by European institutions has been slow to either be widely accepted or made to work. For one thing, the British themselves profited from the people’s identification with their older nations, and the choice of federalism partly recognized the differences and kept them apart from one another. Colonial rule consolidated ethnicities and the politics of division. Space does not permit any elaboration of the historical evolution of ethnicity in Nigeria, but I will point out some key events. The use of Islam to promote the politics of “One North” began after 1945. Elsewhere, politicians resorted to the resurrection of tradition and culture to foster

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unity.

Ethnicity generates conflicts and competition. While it is a cheap way to form a political party, since members of the same group can be easily reached and converted into a strong constituency, it also unleashes rivalries with other political parties built around other ethnicities. Competing elites resort to ethnicity to distribute power, educational amenities, employment, etc. The purpose of controlling the center may partly be to use collective resources to benefit a group. For instance, the politics of revenue allocation has been shaped by ethnicity, while different groups fight over lucrative ministries such as that of petroleum, internal affairs and external affairs.

As important as ethnicity is, it is not the only source of division necessary to understand politics or the place of Islam in Nigeria. In the north, in spite of its presentation of Islam as a hegemonic force and a source of unity, many violent clashes have occurred among groups, and between peoples of the same city. There is the cleavage of religious differences. Islam and Christianity have undermined local religions and control much of the political and social space. The spread of both is uneven, which means religion is sometimes coterminous with communal or ethnic identities. Often a North-South regional divide is also read as the Islamic-Christian divide. An ethnic category as the Igbo in the East may also mean Christian, while Hausa or Fulani identity in the North is both ethnic and religious. Both Islam and Christianity compete for space, converts and political domination. Leaders of religious organizations use the style and language of politics, in their quest for propaganda, control of converts, and the prevention of one another from dominating the political environment. In their interactions, virtually everything is political. A major case in point is the statistics as both play the numbers game: Christians claim that they number more; Muslims say the same. Official records, unreliable for most areas, put the Muslim population at 47%, the Christian at 34% and others at 18%. Both religions are far from homogenous in any aspect. Each is divided into factions, with competing leaders, numbering over 3,000 according to the list of those who are officially registered. National politics often unite them, as in the case of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).

A combination of factors have made religion a powerful factor in Nigerian politics. First is the failure of political leadership. As successive military leaders failed to transform the country, religious organizations sought alternative leaders and leadership models. The stress has been on morality, accountability and spirituality. To many Muslims, Mhumar Gadaffi of Libya and Ayathola Khomeini of Iran provide alternative models to emulate. Second, the failure of institutions and structures of governance have been interpreted as the failure of the state itself. To many Muslims, the failure represents the limitations of secular institutions. Third, the Structural Adjustment Program and its failures in the 1990s instigated tensions expressed as religious conflicts. As the economy declines, more and more people see in religion an escape or a source of opposition to the state. For instance in Kano, the country's political decay and economic problems have not only drawn more people to Islam, it has also radicalized them. Fourth, religion, like ethnicity, is a source of mobilization for political actors. Once a political candidate defines himself as a Muslim and his rival happens to be Christian, politics can acquire the coloration of religious conflict. In the North, many politicians have turned to Islam for power legitimization. There have been power rivalries with Christians and bids to impose the Shari'a over a larger region. These attempts have radicalized the Christian Association of Nigeria to contest all religious symbols and what it perceives as efforts to use Islam to dominate politics. By and large, Northern politicians have continued to profit from Islam, using its symbols as political ideology in order to unite the region against the South and to mobilize their different constituencies. The conflicts play out in the political arena on a permanent basis. To start with, Christians have always been afraid of Islamic/northern domination. There is a pervasive fear that Islam might expand and gain greater influence, by using the resources of the federal government to its advantage. No doubt, there are leaders such as Ahmadu Bello, the first premier of the North, who have had this vision, and there are still vigorous attempts at proselytizing.

The fear of domination is unlikely to disappear as long as religion is part of the definition of community and ethnicity in most parts of the country. In the North, minority elements define themselves as Christians, and they have actually resorted to Christianity to solidify their identity, as in the case of the Kataf of Zangon-Kataf. At the national level, the North-South divide is treated both as ethnic and religious fault lines.

The question of using Shari'a Islamic law has generated additional public controversy since the 1970s. In the writing and ratification of the constitutions of the Second and Third Republics, the demand for a Federal Shari'a Court of

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Appeals created political crisis, requiring the intervention of the military. In both instances, the South interpreted the debates on Shari'a as an attempt to impose Islam on the country. There has always been a political side to the demand for the Shari'a. Its most forceful advocates are not religious preachers or scholars, but a new breed of politicians. The demand for Shari'a enables these ambitious politicians to always seek an ideology to unite the North, to halt the inroad of southern competitors to the north, and to even discredit established northern politicians who are regarded as too soft in advancing the agenda of the North. These young politicians failed in their demands in the 1970s and 1980s, opening them to charges of being either politically immature or unable to understand how to deal with southern opposition. Ever since, Shari'a has continued to generate political controversy.

A new, and perhaps the most aggressive, implementation of Shari'a followed in the first year of the Fourth Republic when the executive and legislative branches of Zamfara State extended the full jurisdiction of the Shari'a court throughout the state and over criminal issues, beginning from October 27, 1999. The Zamfara Shari'a law appears to go beyond the constitutional provision that there should be a Shari'a Court of Appeal in any state that wants it. In a democratic structure, the federal government lacks the power of the military to issue an immediate decree to stop the action of the Zamfara government.

As to the future, Nigeria will continue to be prone to violence, which may limit investment options and create problems for its emerging democratic institutions. Conditions for violence are many-based on communal, ethnic, and social divisions. Internal chaos can be blamed on external agencies, most notably multi national companies. An articulate group of intellectuals blame Nigeria's woes on bad leadership who collaborate with American and Western interests to exploit resources and the poor to the benefit of a small group of people. Where there is extensive poverty and political mismanagement, Islamic radicalism is unstoppable.

The politics of Islam revolves mainly around a domestic agenda, that is seeking greater access to resources and political influence. Islam is a way in which certain constituencies have been able to imagine national political power. Although Muslims are aware of international politics, the pressure is from the outside, sometimes to make Islam more radical. Many of the advantages that have defined Nigeria as a potentially great country still exist. It is Africa's most populous country with a large percentage falling under the age of thirty, which implies that many will be restless and will continue to demand changes and jobs. It has a large number of educated people capable of generating ideas, but the economic basis of a "middle class" is not there to turn them into consumers, tax payers, great thinkers and captains of industry. The political leadership has the ambition of dominating regional politics and leading Africa in world politics. The economy is the second largest in the continent, behind South Africa. Based mainly on revenues from oil, it is capable of being transformed, with careful management, to end massive corruption and to improve the development of agriculture. Without transforming its economy and politics, we should expect Islam to be firmly wedded to issues around poverty, political competitions, and alternative imaginations of the nation state.

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