

Politics for God: Religion, Politics and Conflict in Democratic Nigeria

by

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Abstract

Nigerians have been observed to be more loyal to religion than the state. This is manifested in the growing trend of religiosity, the phenomenal rise in the number of worship centres and influential clergies in Nigeria today. In this regard, this paper discusses the phenomenon of religious politics in the present democratic regime of Nigeria. It also highlights the series of recent conflicts, situated within the context of a growing theoretical discussion on the global resurgence of religion in politics, and its significance to modern politics and how this accounts for increasing manners of conflict in different states. Thus, this paper advocates for the assignment of dignified roles for religious leaders in the constitution in order to reduce the tension that usually accompanies religious politics in Nigeria.

Introduction

Many have researched and written on the politicization of religion or the religionization of politics in Nigeria (Bienen, 1986; Clarke, 1988; Ibrahim, 1989; 1991; 1994; Agbaje, 1990; Hunwick, 1992; Kukah, 1993; 1995; Kastfelt, 1994; Enwerem, 1995; Kukah & Falola, 1996; Falola, 1998; Mu'azzam & Ibrahim, 2000; Best, 2001; Obadare, 2006; Loimeier, 2007; Imo, 2008; Marshall, 2009; Wakili, 2009; Adebani, 2010; Sodiq, 2009). Of these, the earlier ones have indeed dwelled sufficiently on how religion shaped and heightened the tempo of politics in the early political history of Nigeria. And, they demonstrated the significance of religion to the formation of political parties, political mobilization, political legitimacy and voting behaviour of the people in previous democratic experiments of the country.

Hence, they have excellently provided a detailed account of the salience of religion to the major political debates, conflicts and series of collective violence that once characterized the early and recent history of Nigeria. Since the inception of a renewed democratic regime in 1999, religion has continued to surface in the political sphere of the country; and the dramatic and dynamic changes religion has taken in the contemporary global political space has further given much impetus to the phenomenon of religion and politics in Nigeria, and elsewhere.

Given the abovementioned, scholarly focus has again begun to centre on the politics of religion and religion in politics in Nigeria's new democracy. While noting this, it is duly observed that not enough justice has been done to this phenomenon in recent times, most especially on its significance to the multiple conflicts and violence fast enveloping the nation recently. Therefore, this paper is conceived to provide an analysis of the link between religion and politics and its relationship with the increasing rates of violent conflicts being experienced in the country within its present democratic era. Thus, the objective is to push further a thread of discussion on this topic and thereby to contribute to an existing body of literature on the phenomenon by examining the theoretical discourses on the political sociology of religion and the state in order to contextualize the intersection between religion, politics and conflict in the present democratic era of Nigeria.

Religion, Politics and Conflict in the State: A Theoretical Discourse¹

Contrary to the assumptions of the modernization and secularization theorists who suggest the decline or insignificance of religion in the modern politics of the state (see Deutsch, 1953; Rostow, 1959; Almond, 1960; Apter, 1965; Smith, 1970), religion has not ceased to occupy a significant position in the political and economic configuration, and thus, it has resurfaced dramatically and virulently in recent times. Samuel Huntington (1993) consciously observed this trend and theorised that religion including its cultural composition will be a major drive of contemporary global politics. In this regard, Fox and Sandler (2003, p.562) suggest that an important area where religion takes a central stage in the politics of the state is in its ability to 'bolster or undermine' political legitimacy. Religion can thus be a viable instrument to legitimize or illegitimize political regimes (Lewy, 1974; Johnston & Figa, 1988; Nasr, 1988; Haynes, 1994; Juergensmeyer, 1995). This occurs mostly in a country where it is legitimate to invoke religion in political discourses, and where there is diversity in the religious population of a particular country (Fox, 2001).

Given the above, religion represents a significant element of ethnicity and an important source of identity which informs the basis of group discrimination and grievances in particular nations. Fox (1997, p.5) notes from the work of Gurr (1993) that 'religion is salient if it is a defining trait that sets a group apart' and has the capability of shaping all forms of group's political and social activities (Fox & Sandier, 2003, p.568). In this circumstance, there is a possibility of discrimination against minority religious and identity groups by the majority based upon their dissimilar interests and goals in the society (Fox, 2001). Upon perceived discrimination or threat to the survival of a religion, religious institutions can therefore 'play important role in mobilization for both protest and rebellion' (Fox, 1999, p.135)., this is more aided when religion supports the use of force when its core interests are being threatened (Fox & Sander, 2003, p.566). In this light, Juergensmeyer's study (2003) shows that popular modern religions have a strong nexus with situations of violence.

Furthermore, religion represents a strong social force in the politics of the state given its capacity for effective political mobilization. Fox and Sander (2003, pp.567-568) give six major reasons why this is so. One, the restriction of religious activities is often difficult for state regimes; two, religious organizations often enjoy good patronage in the media; three, religious organizations have the capability to easily unite differential social groupings in the society; four, religious organizations have the 'ready-made' platform for political meetings; five, religious organizations are often strong in weak states; and six, religious organizations have strong international links and enjoy global solidarity. ²

Religion in Nigeria: An Historical Background

Islam and Christianity form the two dominant religions in Nigeria. Given the colonial 'civilization' agenda and the resultant demonization and *paganization* of the historical African traditional gods, the essence of the traditional religions were systematically exterminated in the religio-cultural life of the Nigerian peoples after their contact with colonialism. The peoples have since then preferred to be identified with Islam and Christianity. Governments have further conceived the officialization of these two religions as a necessary step towards actualizing national unity in the country (Ibrahim, 1991, pp.116-117). Nigeria's contact with Islam predated that of Christianity and European colonialism. It was facilitated by its spread into Africa south of the Sahara through trade and commerce. The northern part of Nigeria is symbolic to the history of Islam in Africa south of the Sahara and Nigeria in particular, as it penetrated the area through the Kanem-Borno Empire in the 11th century before spreading to other Hausa states.

The eventual incorporation of contradictory local customs into the core of Islam and the further degeneration of Islamic practices by the activities of the ruling class led to the Holy Jihad staged by Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio in the 19th century. The Jihad and the establishment of the expansive Sokoto Caliphate therefore facilitated the spread of Islam across the region and into the heartland of some western Nigerian societies such as Ilorin (see Clarke, 1982; Hiskett, 1984; Sulaiman, 1987; Rasmussen, 1990; Kukah & Falola, 1996).

Islam penetrated the traditional societies of the Yoruba speaking peoples of south-west Nigeria given their established commercial relationship with the peoples of the North, particularly the Nupe and Fulani. The exact period of its real contact with the region remains a subject of controversy, but a mosque was reported to have been built in the old Oyo empire around 1550 (Sani, 2011). The conversion of some influential rulers and chiefs in this region became a significant watershed in the history of Islam among the Yoruba. Islam found its easy acceptance by the Yoruba as it had sufficient answers to some of their various spiritual concerns, and for its accommodation of some of their traditional Yoruba cultural practices which Christianity tends to displace (Sodiq, 2009, p.650-651). For instance, Islam appreciates the existence of the *Jinn* and the methodology of dealing with them, which the Yoruba religiously deified and dreaded. Furthermore, Islam recognises polygamy which was common among the peoples who see many wives and children as a sign of wealth. Also, the return of the liberated formerly enslaved from Sierra-Leone and Brazil in the 19th century further boosted Islamic evangelization in the region, most especially in Lagos (Gbadamosi, 1978).

Nigeria's voyage into the world of Christianity began in the 15th century with the visitation of the Roman and Catholic missionaries to the coastal areas of the Niger-Delta region in the southern part of Nigeria. Although a few churches were built and converts recorded in this period, the vibration of Christian evangelization was only felt and expanded after the return of the liberated slaves from Sierra-Leone and Brazil in 1842.

This was against the backdrop of the thriving missionary enterprise of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, originally sent to Badagry and Abeokuta of the Yoruba speaking region. Christianity soon recorded a boost in the southern region given its opposition to the slave trade and its promotion of Western education. In 1888, an indigenous Church was established following a break away from foreign missionary leadership in response to an accumulation of grievances concerning racial discrimination. This event marked the emergence of indigenous Christian churches in Nigeria. And while this marked the first wave of indigenous Christianization in Nigeria, the proliferation and phenomenon of the *Aladura* churches that sprang up from the Yoruba Christians signifies a second wave (see Olupona, 1991; Sodiq, 2009; Adogame, 2010).

In contrast to the smooth process Christian evangelization underwent in the South, its process in the North was somewhat rough for some obvious reasons. Islam had already become well established in the North and its Muslims had read extensively and known much about Christianity in their Islamic texts given their exposure to early Islamic education (Sodiq, 2009, p.653). In addition, the alliance established by the British colonial masters with the ruling class involved their protection of the traditional Islamic institution of the northern societies (Dudley, 1968). The British further nurtured the fear that Christianity would provide Western education to the people of the North which was capable of stimulating their political consciousness against the traditional institutions that obviously posed a threat to their unchallenged and successful indirect rule in the region (Rasmussen, 1990, pp.176-182).

As a result, the British government banned missionary activities in the region in the first 30 years of their rule except for the CMS which had existed in a village in Zaria prior to their government (Rasmussen, 1990, p.179; Ojo, 2007, p.177). Despite this institutional barrier to their operations, the missionaries under the platform of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) and the Sudan Union Mission (SUM) were able to penetrate the societies, especially the non-Muslim societies of the Middle-Belt region. It is noteworthy that the peoples of the Middle-Belt had already established a history of acrimony with the Hausa-Fulani Muslims of the core north given the former's resistance to the Holy Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio (Morrison, 1982). Hence, Dan Fulani and Fuswak (2002) argue that this development contributed significantly to the wide acceptance of Christianity by the peoples of Middle-Belt as an indication of their opposition to the religion and culture of their sworn opponents – the Hausa Fulanis (for details, see Crampton, 1975).

Islam and Nigerian Politics

Given the philosophy of Islam as a complete way of life for a Muslim, thus Islam has always been closely attached to politics in Nigeria, especially in the Muslim dominated North. As alluded to above, the British duly recognized this fact in their dealings with the northern Islamic societies and explored it to legitimate their colonial rule in the region. After the 1914 amalgamation of Nigeria and emergence of indigenous national politics, Islam has effectively represented a source of ethnic identity, group unity, political mobilization, de-mobilization, regime legitimation and de-legitimation in the country. The Hausa-Fulani of the North thus see themselves as the descendants of Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio, the symbol of the Islamic holy Jihad and a product of an enviable Islamic socio-cultural history wherein Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, a prominent Hausa-Fulani Muslim cleric, asserted that Islam provided 'many common cultural elements' that united the peoples of the region together. And furthermore, he believed that the North was being 'held with absolute contempt because of its unique historical and cultural [Islamic] circumstances' (Gumi & Tsiga, 1994, pp.118-119). Thus, Islam has since been conceived to be synonymous with the North in the political matrix of the country, and consequently it has constituted a focal point of the political interest of the North.

It therefore is of no surprise that the first political party that would emerge from the North, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), would overtly and covertly bore the torch of Islam. Dudley (1968, p.143) rightly notes this by the assertion that the NPC represented the consensus of the Muslim society – the *Ijma'* – and an iota of its rejection by any member of the society signified a sinful Islamic act. Similarly, Falola (1998, p.2) notes that the NPC adopted 'one raised finger' as a symbol of the Unity of God of the Islamic monotheistic faith and at the same time passed the message to its people that the 'two-fingered V-for-victory' symbol of its opponents in the South was a sign of polytheism, which Islam prohibits outright.

Upon this realisation, the non-Muslims of the North floated various oppositionist political groupings and parties to protest the ethno-Islamic political hegemony of the NPC in the region. These include the Tiv Progressive Union (TPU); Middle Zone League (MZL); Middle-Belt People's Party (MBPP); United Middle-Belt Congress (UMBC); Northern Nigeria Non-Muslim League; Birom progressive Union (BPU), with a strong backing from the Christian missionaries, especially SIM and SUM (Dudley, 1968, pp.90-103). For this, the non-Muslim areas were systematically edged out from the developmental programme of the northern region and the federal government, controlled by the NPC (Plotnicov, 1967, p.38).

Interestingly, Islam was also explored as an instrument of de-mobilization and de-legitimation against the overbearing 'Islamic' regime of NPC-dominated governments in the region. This scenario is articulated by Billings (1990) that oppositions to ruling classes who dominate via the political machination of religion also develop radically different interpretations of the same religion to deflate the influence of the dominant regime. This was the case with the establishment of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) as an opposition party by the Muslims of the Yoruba minority of the North in Ilorin. Thus, the NEPU mobilized from the *Madrasah* to spread across its enclave and allied with the Nigerian Muslim Congress against the NPC and also pushed for the modernization of Islam as its own political agenda to win the people's votes (Kukah & Falola, 1996, p.86). Similarly, in the South-West where there is another large population of Muslims, a protest political party was established in Lagos, the United Muslim Party (UMP), against the Christian-dominated Action Group ruling party in the region following grievances over discrimination on the basis of religion. Hence, Islam marked the rallying political point of the UMP which maintained the motto – All Muslims Are One –and attached its major agenda to the promotion of Muslim unity (Kukah & Falola, 1996, p.87).

Notwithstanding, dramatic events at local and international levels heightened the tempo of Islam in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s. The emergence of a new intellectual class in Islamic and Western educational terms, increased the level of political consciousness, and developed palpable disenchantment with the dominant religio-political establishment driven by the Sufi Islamic brotherhood.

Given this, new Islamic movements surfaced to challenge the status-quo, and most especially to provide the impetus to the modernization agenda, kick-started by the first prime minister of the northern region, Ahmadu Bello (Loimeier, 2007, p.50). Of particular reference here are the *Jama'at Nasr Islam* (JNI) established in 1962 and the *Jama'at Izala al-Bida' wa-Iqamat as-Sunna* (JIBWIS) established in 1978, under the strong influence of Muslim cleric Sheikh Abubakar Gumi. These two organizations had as a major ideological framework, hence, the revival of the traditional and pristine version of Islam as a major opposition to the practices of the reigning Sufi brotherhood in the North.

This development charged the atmosphere and prepared the ground for the emergence of a radical trend of Islamic youth movements such as the 'transformed' Muslim Students Society (MSS); the *Dawa* group; the Brothers or *Ikhwan*; and the Islamic Movement (Loimeier, 2007, p.55). The emergence of these groups was also significantly influenced by international events, especially the Iranian revolution in 1979, and the heightened disenchantment from West by the Muslim world.

This development shaped the national politics of the period as Muslims radically redefined their political interests in line with Islam and began to clamour for the incorporation of the *Sharia* legal system into the national judicial system. Thus, the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) came to existence in 1973 for the unity of the Muslims wherein regimes under the leadership of Muslim personalities chose new friends at the international front by establishing good relations with the Muslim countries. Also, a new Islamic identity was sought for the nation in order to give it a better and beneficial status in the Muslim world. Following this, Nigeria registered its membership with the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1985, ostensibly to harness opportunities accruable from Muslim countries. Of course, these developments inflamed the polity as the Christians and nurtured the fear of domination by their Muslim counterparts and a possibility of a gradual extinction of their religio-political strength in the national political structure (this issue will be revisited shortly). Accordingly, the various violent conflicts that followed this scenario have been well discussed in the body of literature earlier mentioned (see Ibrahim, 1989; 1991). Prominent among these include the following: the Kafanchan crisis in March 1987; the May 1988 *Sharia* conflict in the Constituent Assembly; June 1988 clash in Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria; and series of ethno-religious riots in the 1990s.

Christianity and Nigerian Politics

Falola (1998, p.15) suggests that the political consciousness of the Christians was ignited and sharpened by the 'challenge posed by Islam.' This somewhat holds true in the case of the Christian minority of the northern region, however, the politicization of Christianity in Nigeria was also founded by the need to uphold the historical dominance of the educational-economic sphere by the Christians, particularly in the southern part of the country as the employment of the gains of Christianity for political ends started with the northern Christians in the era of regional politics.

Thus, Christians of the Middle-Belt in the North, upon their increased perception of discrimination and gross dissatisfaction with the 'Islamic reign' of the NPC-led government under the leadership of Ahmadu Bello (an ardent of the 'One North, One People' agenda) mobilized themselves to challenge the rule. The first attempt by the Christians in this direction was the establishment of the Northern Nigerian Non-Muslim League following a motion raised in 1949 on the floor of the Northern House of Assembly for the restriction of the activities of the Christian missionaries (Sklar, 1983, p.386).

The League with the strong backing of the SIM and SUM Christian missions provided the organizational framework for the formation of the Middle Zone League (MZL) as a political party with the major agenda of countering the 'Islamic expansionist moves' in the North. The MZL was merged with the Birom Progressive Union in 1955 to form the UMBC as they had a common political interest (Dudley, 1968, pp.93-95). As a consequence, much of the political intrigues that reigned during the period were centred on this mutual bickering between these parties.

At the inter-regional level, the Igbos felt aggrieved with the dominant regime of the Hausa-Fulani (Muslims) after independence. Although one may be accused of advancing a reductionist argument on the rationale concerning the first military coup experienced in Nigeria, writings have shown that religion played a crucial role in the 1966 coup that shattered the first republic in Nigeria. Abubakar Gumi, and a close associate of Ahmadu Bello, writes in his autobiography:

The plotters who carried out the January 1966 massacre should have had the courage at the time of the coup to admit their hatred for Islam as the real motive for their action. Actually, I was told afterwards that they had originally included my name on the list of those to be assassinated together with the Sardauna [Ahmadu Bello]; they changed their mind because they could not agree about the explanation to give to the public, since I was not a politician. Other leaders were more forthright later in celebrating the fact that Igbo land was the only place in the country 'not tainted' by Islam..... (Gumi &Tsigia, 1994, p.123)

This was later explicitly spelled out in the Orka Coup in 1990 when young military officers led by Gideon Orka attempted to topple the regime of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, a Muslim of the Hausa-Fulani origin. The preamble of the coup speech states:

We wish to emphasise that this is not just another coup but a well conceived, planned and executed revolution for the marginalised, oppressed and enslaved peoples of the Middle-Belt and the South [Christians] with a view to freeing ourselves and children yet unborn from eternal slavery and colonisation by a clique [Hausa-Fulani Muslims] of this country. (author's emphasis) (Dawodu.com)

Against this backdrop, Muslims pointed accusing fingers at the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as the architect of the aborted coup. The IBB government unofficially indicted the Christian organization wherein 59 notable Christians were arrested and detained for 2 months for the coup (Falola, 1998, p.112).

In addition, the phenomenal emergence and rise of the 'new generation' Pentecostal churches of the 'born again' doctrine in the 1970s became a significant watershed in the history of Christianity in Nigeria. Their emergence further strengthened the political might of Christianity in the political space. The 'born again' Pentecostals and traditionalist Christians who had earlier stiffly opposed each other over doctrinal matters, had to bury the hatchet and unite to give a stronger political weight to CAN, with the principal objective of challenging an 'Islamic oligarchy' (Kukah & Falola, 1996, p.239). Hence, funding the political interests and strategies of the Christians was the least problem as the Pentecostal churches had already devised newly effective avenue for income generation via the 'doctrine of prosperity'.

The Pentecostal pastors or 'General Overseers' had successfully wooed bank chiefs and successful business personalities to the Church which attracted the 'super rich pastors' and 'church money' in Nigerian society (see Magbadelo, 2004; *BBC News*, 15 June 2011). 'Church money' evidently symbolises the highest source of wealth in the informal sector in present day Nigeria, while the 'oil money' still hold sway in the formal sector. Mfonobong Nsehe of *Forbes Magazine* also rightly confirms this in the following words, 'preaching is big business...it's almost as profitable as the oil commerce' in Nigeria (*BBC News*, 15 June 2011). Given this, CAN became a major instrument of the Christians to channel their political demands and also checkmate the supposed increasing political influence of their Muslim counterparts. Its voice was most audible in the aforementioned *Sharia* debate in the politics of the 1970s and 1980s, and the tense Organization of Islamic Conference brouhaha of the 1980s.

Again, the introduction of politics to Christianity in Nigeria was also informed by the exigency of securing its preponderant influence in the educational-economic sector. There had been a Christian-Western education link that created a good opportunity for the Christians right from the period of colonialism to have better access to education acquire occupational skills to dominate the public service. In addition, as suggested by Falola (1998, p.47), this link created a good rapport between the Christians and the West even after colonialism, which guaranteed over-flowing external funding which set the machinery for the domination of the educational and economic sectors in the Christian dominated South. As a result, Muslim students had to be compelled to display a convincing Christian identity as a major criterion for admission into the dominant missionary schools, given the strong value attached to Western education and civilization in this part of Nigeria.

And in a similar vein, Muslim students were denied Islamic education and forced to receive Bible knowledge in these missionary schools (Sodiq, 2009, p.657). Given this, Christians were able to successfully dominate the political landscape of the South despite the presence of a large number of Muslims, with particular reference to the South-West. In Lagos for instance, Bienen (1985) shows that Christians ‘overwhelmingly’ dominated the politics of the state from the 1920s up till the 1960s (Bienen, 1985, p.123).

Therefore, it was generally conceived as a negative development for the Christian community when the regime of Yakubu Gowon embarked on a project of free education and a takeover of all missionary schools in the country. The Christian missionaries and proprietors of private Christian schools clearly understood that this policy would weaken their economic and political strength in the structure of society, and as a result, the policy was attacked on several religious grounds following the hiccups experienced in agreeing on the terms of financial compensation. It was against this backdrop that CAN came to life in 1976 at a meeting of Christian leaders at the Catholic Secretariat in Lagos with the major objective of uniting the Christians in the midst of this challenge from the government of Gowon (Ibrahim, 1989, p.76; Kane, 2003, p.181).

Religion in Nigeria’s Democracy

Shortly after the historic transition to democratic regime in 1999, the first news that brought Nigerian politics to the limelight again was the over-flogged *Sharia* issue following Ahmed Yarima’s introduction of the *Sharia* Islamic legal system in Zamfara state in October 1999. Yarima earned widespread support and acceptance from the people of Zamfara for his governorship ambition owing to his campaign promise of implementing *Sharia* as a major strategy to address widespread societal decadence among them (see *Journeyman Pictures*, 28 November 2000). Hence, Yarima’s plan was actualised under the platform of the All People’s Party (APP) which later transformed to the All Nigerian People’s Party (ANPP). APP as a political party was strategically structured to possess the image of the old ruling political parties in the North that were synonymous with their conservative Islamic ideology such as the NPC and National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in previous republics. As a result, it was the most popular party in the North and represented the major opposition to the ruling party, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), in the first phase of the present democratic era between 1999 and 2003. Islamic clerics effectively mobilised for Yarima and further legitimated his government given the *Sharia* factor, and they were also well recognised by the regime and integrated into strategic aspects of the state’s public service. Chanting of *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) were most popular at major political rallies in the state. All this successfully gave an Islamic coloration to the regime.

Similarly, this was also the case with Ibrahim Shekarau of Kano state of the same political party with Yerima. In a study conducted by Wakili (2009) on the electoral behaviour of the traditional Muslim clerics in the 2007 elections in Kano state, the clerics were observed to have played a prominent role in the emergence of Shekarau as the governor of the state and also in his government. They vigorously campaigned for him during the elections because of his agenda for *Sharia* and also headed major state agencies such as the *Shura* Committee, *Zakat* and *Husbi* Commission and the *Hisbah* board established in the spirit of *Sharia* after his emergence as the governor of the state between 2003 and 2011.

Shariacracy soon generated a widespread uproar across the nation immediately after it assumed a northern policy following its adoption by 11 other states after Zamfara. Christians in the North suspected the move as another attempt by the Muslim majority to finally silence their voice in the scheme of affairs. Christians were therefore strongly opposed to the move and all its denominations across the country organized a series of sensitization programmes on the implications of the new regime of *Sharia* to the Christian worshipers in various churches (Imo, 2008, p.49). This created an effective avenue to mobilize Christians against the programme. For instance, the CAN made announcements to all churches in Kaduna for a mass protest after the state government under the leadership of Ahmad Makarfi adopted the *Sharia* system in 2000 (Angerbradt, 2011, p.25). Besides, Christians saw the drive towards the implementation of *Sharia* by the northern states as a clear-cut political strategy by the Hausa Muslims to destabilize the regime of a ‘born-again’ Christian president– Olusegun Obasanjo (see *Journeyman Pictures*, 28 November 2000). This, for instance, is echoed by Archbishop Ola Makinde, the Chairman of the Abuja chapter of CAN, stating that:

..Part of the aim of the introduction of the political *Sharia* in Nigeria is to prevent or crush the spread of Christianity in the North. Another aim is to pull down the government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo which the political *Sharia* apostles see as a government headed by an infidel. (*Post Express*, 25 July 2001)

This particularly came on the heels of the Christian identity Obasanjo exhibited immediately after his release from prison following some years in the political imprisonment of the erstwhile Nigerian head of state, General Sani Abacha. He was well received by the Christian community as a ‘born-again evangelical’ (Imo, 2008, p.47). Obasanjo was further seen as a ‘virtual messiah’ that had come through a divine plan to be the chosen candidate of the Christians who had since 1979 been sidelined from occupying the office of presidency, except for the 84 days interim regime of Ernest Shonekan in 1993 (Obadare, 2006, p.669). In addition, Obasanjo widely opened the doors of the Presidential Villa, the *Aso Rock*, to Christian leaders to pray for Nigeria and also built a Christian chapel in the Villa (Obadare, 2006; p.672). His major defence policy upon assumption into office was also enough to generate much suspicion from the Muslim community.

Obasanjo restructured the nation's Armed Forces in such a way that the Muslim Hausa-Fulani top military officers who had hitherto dominated the defence cum power segment of the nation since the 1960s were systematically edged out in favour of the Christians. The Muslim elites in the North therefore felt insecure with this restructuring 'which in turn leads to an almost reflexive adoption of 'tribe' mentality' (Sanusi, 2003, p.4). However, when it was becoming clear that the pendulum of power was again swinging to the side of the North, the heightened tension of *Sharia* sharply reduced. But when the winds of change altered, Obasanjo was among the first individuals to publicly announce the 'death' of *Sharia* in the North. At the end of his regime in 2007, he told a congregation of Christians at an annual event that he warned the *Sharia* actors in the North that:

If *Sharia* was from God, it will survive but that if it was politically motivated it will fizzle out....today the so-called *Sharia* introduced by the selfish governors is dead. (*Punch News*, 12 August 2007)

Truly, by 2007, when Umar Musa Yaradua of the North emerged as the President, *Sharia* had died a 'natural death' in most of the states that embraced it, except for Kano. The case of Kano is particularly different because of the background of the governor who was a Muslim cleric. Hence, Shekarau, the governor of the state, vigorously and outstandingly pursued *Sharia* to address moral and developmental challenges in the state via the establishment of the *Zakah Commission* and *Hisbah Board*. The *Zakah Commission* being an agency responsible for the collection of tax from the rich as stipulated in the religion of Islam, had a broad programme for poverty alleviation. This include the provision of medical assistance, working capital to local entrepreneurs, vocational training to the unemployed youths, and assistance to the aged. The *Hisbah Board* as an Islamic paramilitary agency of the state works with government and the police to promote peace in the society. It also addressed the malaise of girl-child trafficking and marital crisis (Yusufari, 2004). However, *Sharia* still played a critical role in the politics of Zamfara state at the end of Yerima's administration in 2007. His successor, Aliyu Shinkafi, who decamped to the PDP during his reign and clashed with Yerima, was totally rejected in the 2011 elections mostly for his poor implementation of *Sharia*. As a result, the new governor of the state, AbubakarYari Abdul-Aziz, displaced the incumbent in the governorship elections due to his alliance with Yerima and his promise for the re-introduction of *Sharia* (*Nigerian Compass*, 17 May 2011; *The Nation*, 18 May 2011).

Religion again featured prominently in the political process that informed the emergence of the circumstantial presidency of Goodluck Jonathan in 2010 and the general elections that followed in April 2011. It began with the failed attempt of Olusegun Obasanjo to unconstitutionally prolong his regime in a process dubbed the 'third term agenda' in 2006. As a result, Obasanjo was left with no choice than to quickly arrange for a successor that would better protect the legacies of his regime.

Taking into consideration a 'gentleman' agreement of power rotation between the North and South in his party - the PDP, his best choice was a relatively corrupt-free and disciplined northern Muslim - Umar Musa Yaradua - who had successfully served as a two-term governor in Katsina state. In an election categorized as the most controversial in the political history of Nigeria, Yaradua emerged as the president of the country in April 2007 (Suberu, 2007; ICG, 2007). Yaradua, being a victim of acute heart disease-pericarditis, had difficulty in holding on to power and effectively running his government. This gave his closest aides otherwise known as the 'Cabal' (mostly from the North) the ample advantage to wield much influence during his regime. Given the eventual intensity of his illness and the reluctance of his influential aides to hand over power to a Christian from the South, a Saudi Arabian hospital was strategically chosen as a secret presidential residence. This arrangement actually worked out as planned as the Saudi Arabian authorities on religious solidarity proved supportive of Yaradua and his government in his last days while receiving treatment at the hospital despite series of local and international pressures on Riyadh (see *Next Newspaper* 8 May 2010; 9 May 2010).

At the heat of this tension, *Save Nigeria Group*, a civil society group under the headship of a Lagos-based Pentecostal pastor, Tunde Bakare, was at the centre of an intense protest directed at the parliament to terminate the reign of dying Yaradua and declare Jonathan as the President. It is also noteworthy that only some selected religious leaders were allowed to see the ailing President, apart from his closest aides upon his return to the country. Hence, the Imams were given special privilege to see him and inform the public about his state of health, and it was only after the Christian community raised objection to this special privilege that some of their representatives were permitted to visit and pray for him. And later, at the declaration of Jonathan as the President of Nigeria, given the death of Yaradua in May 2010, the relief and applaud from the Christian community was quite obvious. For instance, Reverend Matthew Kukah, a prominent Christian cleric in Nigeria, was among the first individuals that read religious meanings to the process that produced the presidency of Jonathan. He prophesied that it was a 'monumental act of divine epiphany' and 'this man's (Goodluck Jonathan) rise has defied logic and anyone who attempts to explain it is tempting the gods' (*Guardian*, 13 May 2010, quoted by Obadare, June 10 2010).

Already irked by this development, it also became an open affront on the Hausa-Fulani Muslims when Jonathan with the strong backing of Obasanjo and other influential southerners declared to run for presidency under the platform of PDP in the 2011 election. To the Hausa-Fulani northerners, it was a complete violation of an existing 'zoning formula' which was supposed to be in favour of the North, because Yaradua was unable to complete his two-term regime while Obasanjo, had an uninterrupted two-term presidency between 1999 and 2007. This controversy heated the polity particularly in the build-up to the PDP presidential primaries. Thus, the North teamed up under the platform of the Northern Elders Political Forum (NPLF) to produce a 'Northern Consensus Candidate' in order to neutralize the chances of Jonathan as the incumbent in the primaries.

They relied on this strategy to create the best opportunity for the emergence of a northern candidate under the platform of PDP for the presidential election. Their outright loss to Jonathan at the PDP primaries following the poor outing of Atiku Abubakar as the 'Consensus Candidate' at the event therefore required a new scheming; the shopping for an alternative northern candidate outside the PDP. Their choice was General Muhammad Buhari, a former Head of State, notable for political discipline and zero-tolerance for corruption in the nation (see *TheNews* 13 December 2010; 25 January 2011; 11 April 2011).

Muhammad Buhari, who had earlier openly supported the *Sharia* cause, had been tagged a Muslim fanatic by many, especially the Christians. The political party he successfully floated for his presidential ambition after leaving the ANPP over unsettled ideological conflict - the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) - was also categorized as an Islamic northern party. This is particularly against the backdrop of the nature of supporters it attracted and the spread of the party which had more presence in the North and almost none in the South. CPC enjoyed the patronage of the Muslim masses, *Almajari* students and Muslim clerics in the North who gave Buhari the epithet, *Mai Gaskiya* (the truthful one) as a mark of their high level of trust in him. Realising his slim chances in the presidential race given the general perception of him being a Muslim fanatic, Buhari devised a pragmatic strategy of opening up to the Christian community by specially selecting Pastor Bakare as his running mate and on several occasions, paid official visits to influential Nigerian pastors. Despite this attempt towards constructing a new identity for himself, Buhari could not be detached from his strong Islamic background going by the popularity and patronage he enjoyed from the Islamic institutions that were effectively explored to garner as much as possible votes for him. In what seems like a confirmation of the foregoing, Kanti Bello, a notable PDP stalwart, stated that the CPC adopted a strategy that 'relied on religion as a weapon of campaign.....the CPC used the Council of *Ulamas* [Muslim clerics] in the North to campaign for Buhari, which portrayed him as a candidate of Muslims' (*TheNews*, May 2 2011). It is further reported that Jonathan's supporters in the Muslim North despite being Muslims were considered working against the interest of Islam and enemies of the North given their affiliation with Jonathan's PDP (*Tell*, 27 April 2011).

Similarly, the Chief Imam of a central mosque in Sokoto and his students were arrested by the police for defacing the posters of Jonathan in the daylight in February 2011 prior to the elections in April. The Imam never regretted his action. He stated thus:

I am not regretting my action at all. I think I have succeeded in passing my message because what I did was to make Nigerians and the world know that we the people of Sokoto are not with President Jonathan, we are not supporting his candidature because he has violated the zoning arrangement that favours the Northern part of the country. (*Sunday Trust*, 6 March 2011)

Jonathan, on the other hand, was also not far from the church for support and mobilization for his presidential ambition. The most visible and much debated of this was his visit to the Pentecostal's *Redeemed Christian Church of God* in December 2010, where he knelt down before the Church's popular pastor, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, in the open glare for his prayers to succeed in the elections (see *PM News*, 18 December 2010). Choosing that particular event to openly show his good relationship with the Christ is quite instructive. The event labelled the 'Holy Ghost Night' marked the 2010 episode of an annual gathering of millions of Christians from all parts of the country as a programme of the *Redeemed* church to usher in a blessed new year.

In the same vein, a notable Pentecostal pastor, Paul Adefarasin of the *House on the Rock* Church in Lagos, was reported to have impressed it upon his followers that the political system had for long been dominated by the Muslims and there was the need for them to go all out for a Christian presidential candidate in the 2011 elections. The *PM News* reported thus:

Adefarasin said that the polity has been Islamized for so long and Christians must wake up and pray against it. [To him] 'Nigerians used to be the most educated people in the world until the likes of Abacha and Murtala Muhammed came and scattered our educational system to slow down the South so that the North can catch up, instead of speeding up the north.' (*PM News*, 15 November 2010).

Hence, the 2011 elections appeared to be a political battle between the Muslims and the Christians as Jonathan and Buhari signified the major contenders of the presidential elections. The outcome of the elections clearly confirms this observation. The votes reflected a voting pattern significantly determined by religion and ethnicity. Jonathan had a landslide victory in the Christian dominated areas of the South and also the Christian areas of the North otherwise known as the Middle-Belt region. This guaranteed him a landslide victory after winning 23 states in the country and polling 22, 495, 187 votes. He was rejected outright in the Muslim's 'Core North' where Buhari swept all the votes in its 12 states including Sokoto, Zamfara, Niger, Kano, Kebbi, Katsina, Bauchi, Kaduna, Jigawa, Borno, Gombe and Yobe (*TheNews*, May 2 2011). The intense violence that followed this development shall be discussed below. But it must be mentioned that there have been allegations and counter-allegations from both parties that massive rigging were perpetrated in favour of each of these two candidates in the regions that signify their support base given religious and ethnic sentiments they enjoyed in these places. The CPC alleges in its petition to the Presidential Election Tribunal that the election was clearly rigged in 20 states mostly in the South in favour of Jonathan. On the other hand, the PDP also forwards the argument that there was widespread electoral fraud especially 'underage voting and religious intimidation' in the Muslim North in favour of Buhari (TMG, 9 May 2011).

The Violent Conflicts

Three special cases of the violence instigated by religious politics in the present democratic era in Nigeria are presented: the *Sharia* riot in Kaduna in 2000, ethno-religious violence in Jos, and the 2011 post-election violence in some northern states.

Kaduna *Sharia* Riot

Kaduna state symbolises a unique state in northern Nigeria. It has a combination of Christians and Muslims who both lay claim to being the majority in the state. Muslim Hausa-Fulanis are geographically located in its northern part, while the Christians occupy the southern part of the state. Muslims have for long been dominant in the state which creates tension among the ethno-religious groups of the state (Angerbrandt, 2011, pp.18-19). This simple background makes it easy to understand the basis for the large-scale violence that followed the implementation of *Sharia* by the state government in 2000, which started with the bill proposed for the implementation of *Sharia* in the State House of Assembly in January 2000.

Thus, a series of rallies in support and opposition to the bill followed from Muslims and Christians. Christians mobilized in thousands to register their displeasure with the government's *Sharia* agenda. Different accounts exist on how a protest staged on February 21 2000 eventually degenerated into a bloody confrontation between the Muslims and Christians. On one account, it was reported that it degenerated into a severe crisis when Muslim youth in support of *Sharia* and angered by the protest of their Christian counterparts, stoned the protesters (Police Report, February 2000, cited in Sanusi, 2009). On another account, it was alleged that the violence started when Christians started burning mosques and killed a Muslim (Angerbrandt, 2011, p.25). The conflict which lasted for three days, recorded 609 deaths including 4 policemen, as reported by the Nigerian police authorities. In addition, 123 churches and 55 mosques were burnt, while 1, 944 houses and 746 vehicles were vandalised in the crisis. And, it was also reported that the crisis caused the displacement of 125, 000 people (Angerbrandt, 2011, p.25).

Ethno-religious Conflict in Jos

Since September 2001, Jos city in Plateau state of north-central Nigeria has been characterized by intense violence. Although it has been argued elsewhere that the economic factor plays a critical role in the perennial crisis in the city (Onapajo, 2011), elements of religion cannot be completely distanced from the violent confrontations among the dominant ethno-religious groups in Jos. It is also noteworthy that there has been a history of acrimony between the non-Muslim natives of Jos-the Berom, Anguata, Afizare, and the Hausa-Fulani Muslims on religio-political matters following the militant resistance of the former to the Fulani Holy Jihad in the 19th century.

Yet, it was European colonialism that brought these warring parties together into a marriage of mutual suspicion. In this light, the politics of the city particularly in Jos North local government has since been largely shaped and inflamed by religion, hence occasioning series of conflicts among the Muslim Hausa-Fulanis and the Christian natives. Tension started brewing in the city following the introduction of *Sharia* in the 'Core North' in 2000. Native Christians nurtured the fear that Muslims in the state were also scheming to facilitate the introduction of *Sharia* in the Plateau state and thus successfully dominate the whole of the North. Regarding this, an international Christian Journal, alleged that:

...There is Muslim aggression in Nigeria trying to take over Christian areas and then the whole nation. The violence in Nigeria is typical of the way Islam spreads.....(*English Churchman*, 12-19 February, 2010).

As a consequence, the recently heightened and increased hostility between the religious groups in the city has a link with the above, and pushed into the arena of politics. In September 2001, a clash occurred between the native Christians and Hausa Muslims after the appointment of Mallam Mukhtar Muhammed, a Hausa Muslim, as the Director of of the federal government's poverty alleviation programme of Jos North local government. The Christians were strongly opposed to this appointment given their fear that this would provide an opportunity to the Muslim population to further advance their political and economic interests. The response to this action from the Muslim community eventually led to a bloody confrontation between the groups which consumed 915 lives and several properties worth millions of Naira (*Reuters*, 23 January 2010). Again in 2008, violent clash broke out after elections were conducted in Jos North local government which was followed by the outcome of the election tensely contested between a candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and a candidate of the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP), one a Christian, and the other a Muslim Hausa-Fulani. Before the former was declared winner, the members of the latter's community had already started protesting given their belief that the election was massively rigged by the state's electoral body in connivance with the state governor, Jonah Jang, to favour the ruling party and a relative of the governor (Ostien 2009, pp.26-27).

Post-election Violence in 2011

In an already charged atmosphere following several bombings and political intrigues, the April 16 2011 presidential election was staged with Jonathan of PDP and General Buhari of CPC as the major contenders of the highest office in the country. When the news was filtering in via a live broadcast of the elections that Jonathan was already maintaining a clear lead in the South, the Muslim supporters of Buhari, who had earlier complained of massive rigging in the elections, went on rampage. Defying the early sermon in several mosques in their enclave against bloodshed and unlawful destruction of properties, the protesting youths visited their anger on the INEC staffs, members of PDP, Christians and the northern elites mostly of the PDP who they perceived to have conspired with the ruling party to perpetuate fraud in the elections.

By the time the final results would be announced, which clearly suggested that Jonathan had overwhelmingly won in 23 states, the violent protest that started in Kaduna had spread speedily to other parts of the North. In what seems unprecedented in the history of revolts in the North, the traditional rulers who hitherto enjoyed absolute loyalty from the people were one of the major victims of the crisis. The properties of first class Emirs such as Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar – the Sultan of Sokoto; Alhaji Ado Bayero-the Emir of Kano; Alhaji Sheu Idris- the Emir of Zazzau, and others in this category were torched. These were believed to be the conspirators that worked with Jonathan's PDP to rig the elections. Many youth corpsers serving as adhoc staff of the Independent National Electoral Officers were killed. Christians were also major targets of the irate youths. To demonstrate the gravity of the riot, the police authorities reported that 520 people including 6 police officers lost their lives in Kaduna and Niger states alone. In addition, 157 churches, 46 mosques, 1, 435 houses, 437 vehicles and 219 motorcycles were burnt. Similarly, the Human Rights Watch reports that 800 lives vanished in the violence across the North (*Weekly Trust Online*, 23 April; *Tell*, 27 April 2011; *Daily Sun*, April, 27; *TheNews*, 2 May 2011).

Conclusion

This paper attempted to again show the extent to which politics is driven by religion in Nigeria. It also detailed the series of political conflicts this phenomenon has occasioned in the present democratic era. Observing this, Falola (1998, p.50) posits that 'loyalty to religion is often more important than loyalty to the state among Nigerians.' While the significant role religion plays in Nigerian politics becomes obvious at every count of events, major state actors don't downplay it as insignificant in the body polity of Nigeria. For instance, in the heat of the abovementioned post-election violence, General Buhari declared that the event 'is purely a political matter, and it should not in any way be turned into an ethnic, religious or regional one.' As it seems, Nigerian politicians advance this manner of argument to further benefit from the 'religious capital' in politics.

This is particularly so given the fact that religion in its present form represent a viable societal structure that is not given due recognition in the Nigerian constitution. This gives people the opportunity to easily twist it for personal interests which in several cases lead to severe violence. There is therefore the need for an adequate and succinct definition of the role of religion in the state and politics of the country. Religious leaders need to be constitutionally accorded due respect and assigned official responsibilities in order to give them a sense of belonging in Nigeria. It is when these clergies begin to have a consciousness of being state leaders and not outcast in the society that they would be able to sincerely work for the interest of the nation. They would be able to control their followers and caution them against the act of violence. They will also have a sense of pride and become less dependent and attached to selfish politicians. Several studies have also shown that in societies where religion plays an influential role like Nigeria, it can be very effective in promoting peace (Arjomand, 1993; Volf, 2000). In this light, religious institutions when harnessed properly can also be important agents of peace rather than violence.

Footnote

¹ I rely much on the body of work of Jonathan Fox on religion and the state. See J. Fox & S. Sandler (2003). Quantifying Religion: Toward building more effective ways of measuring religious influence on state-level behaviour; Fox, J. (1999). Do religious institutions support violence or the status-quo?; Fox, J. (2001). Are Middle-East conflicts more religious?; Fox, J. (1997). The salience of religious issues in ethnic conflicts: A large-N study; Fox, J. (2000). Religious causes of ethnic discrimination; Fox, J. (2000). The effects of religious discrimination on ethnic protest and rebellion.

² The author observed this trend in Zamfara state while undergoing the mandatory one year National Youth Service Corp programme between 2005 and 2006.

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