

Religion and Politics in Nigeria: A Comparative Study of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the Christian Association of Nigeria

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Abstract: *Among all the religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity record large numbers of adherents and the country's politics is almost based on the two religious divides. This paper examines two religious bodies; the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) established to regulate the activities of Muslims and Christians respectively in the country. The works finds out that both religious bodies take active part in state politics and have struggled for self-relevance and acknowledgement whenever issues of national concerns arise. The struggle began in the 1970s and 1980s when Muslims advanced for the incorporation of the Islamic law into the Nigerian constitution on the ground that the nation has since her inception been governed by Christian law in the guise of British constitution. The result has been religious tension and violence. The work therefore recommends collaboration of the two religious bodies following their aims and objectives to assist the government in fostering peace, progress and development of the country.*

Keywords: Religion, Politics, NSCIA and CAN

1. Introduction

Prior to the advent of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, the religion of the people was the traditional religion. This traditional religion meant everything to the Nigerian people. Their occupation; farming and trading, native administration by the Kings and Chiefs, social life were all religiously based. The introduction of the two foreign religions; Islam and Christianity changed the pattern of relationship in the society. These religions have some things in common in terms of background, geography and basic principles. For instance, both of them originated from the Middle East. Their guiding principles are based on divine revelation and they have prophets as mediums through whom God's words are received and articulated. Islam and Christianity came to the shore of the Niger at different time periods and locations. Islam came through North Africa into the North of Niger and became established as the dominant religion of the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group with a viable Caliphate system of administration. Christianity on the other hand came through the Portuguese missionaries in the Southern part of Nigeria. The British colonizers extended their colony from south to the north and promised the northerners that their religion will in no way be interfered with. Thus the European introduced an Indirect Rule system seeing the well established caliphate system of administration orchestrated by Islam. The amalgamation of 1914 and the subsequent infidelity of Lord Lugard on the policy of non interference brought in religious sentiments into the body polity of Nigeria. Consequently, religion began to be the basis of ethnic identity, group unity, political mobilization, legitimating and illegitimating of the ruling government. Thus, various organizations emerged along the two religious divides (Islam and Christianity) to serve as a basis for the unity of each faith and to struggle for leadership positions and legitimacy.

This study therefore focuses on the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic affairs (NSCIA) which serves as a forum for all Muslims unity in Nigeria and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) representing the Christian faith. We intend to highlight their roles and relative involvement in state politics. We will first clarify our key concepts.

2. Clarification of Terms

2.1 Religion

Religion is a complex phenomenon. Over the years scholars have attempted to fashion a suitable definition of religion but none has been acclaimed to be universally acceptable. All attempts happened to fall short of one issue or another. We do not intend to involve in the definitional maze in this study as such we explore the etymology of religion from three Latin words vis-à-vis *Ligare* meaning to bind, *Relegere* meaning to unite or link, and *Religio* meaning relationship. From this exploration, religion is a relationship that exists between human beings and Divine beings. Bouquet articulated it as "a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply, God" [1] (2, 1993, Omoregbe). However, we consider religion in this study as human activities manifesting through beliefs and ritual practices in response to the Supersensible Being, believed to exist.

2.2 Politics

Politics is from two Greek words *polis* meaning city and *tikos* meaning art, skill or method. Etymologically, it is the art of governing a city. A city here designates an organized and governed territory as a state under the jurisdiction of city

[2] (2, 1988, Nwoko). According to Ejizu [3] (1-3, 1993), in his analysis of a city asserts that, the popular believed was that political life as an organized mode of living started in the city and spread to the neighborhood. In this classical sense, politics is held to be the art of organizing men in a society to live and interact with one another for the realization of their social nature. It therefore requires the institutionalization of social structures such as the establishment of legal and government systems to facilitate this interaction [4] (2-3, 1988, Nwoko). Awolowo (1987) defines politics as the science and art of the management of public affairs [5].

3. Religion and Nigeria Political Milieu

Before the attainment of independence in 1960, the management of public affairs in Nigeria was in the hands of the British Governor. They adopted several constitutions from 1922 with the Clifford constitution to the Independence constitution of 1954. Nigeria as it exists today is a pluralistic society in that it exists with different cultural and religious groups but the management of her affairs has been shaped in line with European ideas. Tukur (1, 1999) stated in his prolegomena on *Leadership and Governance in Nigeria* that:

For nearly five decades, Nigeria has been experimenting with Euro-American inspired concepts, ideas and institutions in the regulation and management of its public affairs. Yet the country is still in search of a system which will enable it to develop effective integration mechanisms, responsive and efficient institutions and a style of government which will facilitate the creation of a civil polity and tackling of socio-political and economic problems in a manner harmonious with the world view, way of life and temperament of the population [6].

The possible reason for the above proposition is the relegation of the traditional religion that had meant everything to the people and the introduction of foreign practices alien to their world view. Worst still was the pattern of relations between Muslims and Christians which the colonial master could not reconcile before their exit. The relations have somewhat be ambivalent as each struggles through their adherents for expansion and to enforce the core principles of faith in the country. Thus, according to Onapajo, [7] the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 and the emergence of indigenous national politics saw religion effectively representing a source of ethnic identity, group unity, political mobilization, regime legitimization and de-legitimization in the country (36, 2012, Onapajo).

Basically, this accounts for the reason why the first political party in North, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), overtly and covertly bears the touch of Islam. To this, Duddley [8] (143,1968) affirmed that the NPC represented the consensus of the Muslim Society- the Ijma- and any iota of its rejection by any member of the society signified a sinful Islamic act. Also, Falola [9] (2, 1998) reported 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 opponent in the South, was a sign of polytheism which Islam prohibits out rightly. Similarly, to

gain identity and group unity, the non-Muslims in the North formed opposition political groups and parties to protest the ethno-Islamic political hegemony of the NPC in the region. Among such groups are 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 (46, 2012, Onapajo) [10].

In another development, Islam was also explored as an instrument of demobilization and de-legitimizing against the over bearing Islamic regime of the NPC dominated government in the region. This was the case of Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), a Muslim Yoruba minority political party of the North in Ilorin. To this Kukah and Falola (86, 1996), revealed that the NEPU mobilized from the Madrasah to spread across its enclave and allied with the Nigeria Muslim Congress against the NPC and also pushed for the modernization of Islam as its own political agenda to win the people's votes [11]. A similar development occurred in the South particularly the South-West having a large population of Muslims who formed the United Muslim Party (UMP) as a protest political party against the Christian-dominated Action Group ruling party in the region following grievances over the discrimination on the basis of religion. In Lagos particularly, was Muslims record a considerable large population, Islam stands as the rallying political point of the UMP with the motto: "All Muslims Are One". Its major objective was to promote the unity of the Muslims (87, 1996, Kukah and Falola) [12].

From the analysis above, it is crystal clear that religion played a key role in Nigeria politics. Religion serves as a basis for identity, mobilization and legitimization in the polity. To further strengthen the unity of faith and to protect the interest of members of these religions so as to continue advancing the principles on which each of the religions is based, groups and associations started springing up from Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. These associations became an organized body through which each of the two religions advance their course in the management of the affairs of the public. We now turn to the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the Christian Association of Nigeria, the two major umbrella bodies representing the interest of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria respectively.

4. The Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA)

In an effort to ensure the unity of the Nigeria Muslims and to close all existing gap between differing Muslims in the North and South, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs was established. The council was founded in 1977 with Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, the sultan of Sokoto as the President and the Shehu of Borno as the deputy president. Its head quarter is located in Kaduna. The governing body of the council is made up of representatives from each state of the federation. This council is the only Muslim organization usually recognized to liaise with the Federal Government on Muslim affairs.

4.1 Aims and Objectives

1. To act as a forum for debate for all Nigerian Muslims.
2. To unify Muslim opinion on issues relating to legal and educational developments in the country.
3. To help promote Muslim consciousness and improve communication.
4. To provide a firm base for the future development of Islam (179, 1992, Farzan) [13].
5. To determine the date of Muslims festivals and organize pilgrims for Hajj.

5. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)

The move towards ecumenism among Christians originally led to the formation of the Christian Association of Nigeria. The association was founded in 1976 with Cardinal Dominic Ekandem as the president and C.O. Williams, the Secretary (421, 2005, Nwanaju) [14]. Prior to the formation of CAN, the Northern Christian Association (NCA) was the Christian organization existing in the North. It was formed in 1964 in response to the threat of Islamic expansionism and its political domination. Therefore, to have a unified body representing the Christian faith in Nigeria, NCA was changed to CAN in 1976 (Kukah, 1993: 54) [15].

5.1 Aims and Objectives

The Christian Association of Nigeria is a fellowship of Churches, working together to promote the glory of God by encouraging the growth and unity of the churches, and by helping them to salvation. Below are some of its objectives.

1. To serve as a basis of response to the unity of the Churches, especially as contained in Jesus' pastoral prayer: 'that they all may be one'.
2. To act as a liaison committee, by means of which its member church can consult together and when necessary, make common statements and take common action.
3. To be watch-dog of the spiritual and moral welfare of the nation.
4. To propagate the Gospel.
5. To promote understanding among the various people and strata of society in Nigeria (421, 2005, Nwanaju) [16].

6. The CAN and NSCIA in Nigeria Politics

From the aims and objectives of both the CAN and NSCIA, it is clear that they represent the same function for Christianity and Islam respectively. However, the emergence of these groups had a significant influence on the shape of politics in Nigeria. Between 1970s and 1980s Muslims intellectuals began to seek for new identity for Islam in order to give it a better and beneficial status in the Muslim world. They started advancing for Shar'iah the Islamic Law to be incorporated in the constitution. According to them, of the three laws in Nigeria; (the Islamic law, English Law and the Native law), the Shar'iah has not been given due attention in the constitution. The move started in 1978 Constituent Assembly. During the proceedings, there arose a controversy over the Shar'iah question. Unable to reach a consensus with the Christian representatives, ninety-three Muslims representatives staged a walkout from the proceedings due to the rejection by the Christian of the provision of Shar'iah in

the draft constitution during the debate (116, 1993, Kukah) [17]. However, a compromise provision was reached through the Military Government intervention with the provision for Shar'iah court of appeal for states that wanted it in a limited jurisdiction of personal status under section 240 subsection 1.

In 1988, the antagonism to Shar'iah came again during the constitution making process. The Christians representatives at the conference demanded for the removal of the provision of the Shar'iah from the Nigeria constitution. This resulted in a more serious acrimony between the advocates of Shar'iah and those that called for its total abrogation in the polity.

In 1999, shortly after the transition to democratic rule in Nigeria, the Zamfara state governor, Ahmed Yerima of the All Nigerian people's Party, introduced the Shar'iah as the official legal system for the state owing to the provision of the 1999 constitution which stipulates in section 4 subsection 7 that: "the house of assembly of a state shall have the power to make laws for peace, order and good government of the state". This gesture according to Onapajo was to transform the ANPP to possess the image of the old ruling political party of the North that were synonymous with the conservative Islamic ideology of NPC and NPN in previous republics (51, 2012, Onapajo) [18]. Consequently, the ANPP became the most popular in the north and represented the major opposition to the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

Following this development, 11 states in the north adopted the Shar'iah as their official legal system making it assumed a national policy. Christians in the North suspected the move as another attempt by the Muslim majority to finally silence their voice in the scheme of affairs. The CAN in reaction to this made announcements to all churches in Kaduna for a mass protest when the state government under the leadership of Ahmad Makarfi adopted the Shar'iah in 2000. The CAN saw the drive towards the implementation of the Shar'iah, by the northern states as a clear-cut political strategy by Hausa Muslims to destabilize the regime of the Christian president-Olusegun Obasanjo. This for instance, was echoed by Archbishop Ola Makinde, the Chairman of the Abuja chapter of CAN, who stated that, the aims of the introduction of the political Sharia in Nigeria was to prevent or crush the spread of Christianity in the North and also to pull down the government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo which the political Shar'iah apostles saw as a government by an infidel (52, 2012, Onapajo) [19]. The protest led by the CAN resulted into a serious religious crisis that led to death of so many people and property worth millions were destroyed as well.

Another issue that brought the CAN and NSCIA into debate in Nigeria polity was the OIC saga. OIC here refers to the Organization of Islamic Conference. The official registration of Nigeria as a member in 1985 by the Babagida's administration generated a serious reaction among the Christians represented by CAN. The development inflamed the polity as CAN protested against Nigeria's membership of the OIC which it saw as a plan to Islamize the country and to gradually extinct the Christians' religio-political strength in the national political structure. This was one of

the reasons that led to the Kafanchan religious crisis of March 1987. This made the government set-up a 20-member committee of Muslims and Christians to examine the implication of Nigeria's membership. Kilani, A.O. (102-103, 1998), highlighted the outcome of the committee as follows: Anti-OIC group contented:

- I. that joining the OIC is not one of the pillars of Islam;
- II. that the conditionality of OIC for the purported soft loan from Muslim sources is venomous to the body polity of Nigeria;
- III. that Nigeria's membership of OIC foments religious segregation, strife and discrimination;
- IV. That they can settle for Muslims joining the OIC at individual and organization level, but they would not settle for Nigeria's joining at government level.

The pro-OIC advanced:

- I. that the OIC was an international organization and since Nigeria is a member of most international organization, her membership of OIC was in order;
- II. that economic benefits are to be derived from Nigeria's membership of the OIC and that these benefits would flow to all Nigerians and not Muslims alone;
- III. that membership of OIC would also advance the practice of Islam;
- IV. That prevailing customs and practices rooted in Nigeria's Christian colonial heritage give pre-eminence to Christianity over Islam [20].

The last points raised by the supporters of Nigeria's OIC membership has been a source of worry for the Muslims who felt that Christian heritage has come to be accepted as way of life without regards to Islam. Kilani (1998) went further to highlight the various instances of how Islam has been relegated in Nigeria's social policy.

In the first place, Saturday and Sunday have been work-free days which benefit the Christian worshippers but Friday; a day for the Muslim worshippers enjoys no similar status. Secondly, the Gregorian calendar used in the country is named after Pope Gregory of the Christian faith while the Muslim Hijrah Calendar is relegated. Also, the first of January, the beginning of the Gregorian calendar is always declared as a public holiday but there is no holiday on Awwal-Muharram which is the first of Huharram in Hijrah calendar. Thirdly, Nigeria has a diplomatic relations with the Vatican City which represents the interest of the Catholics alone. Fourthly, public funds are spent to decorate public buildings and organized expensive parties during Christmas [21].

On the question of political opportunities in the country, the CAN Northern zone made a publication on leadership in Nigeria that Muslims dominated the leadership of not only Northern parts of the country but the nation as a whole. According to Mukhtar U. Bunza (148-149, 2007), the CAN queried that since independence most Nigerian leaders were Muslims, that the key positions in government are held by Muslims, that despite the large number of Christians in the Police force in Northern Nigeria, most of the Police Commissioners and Divisional Police Officers (D.P.O.s) were Muslims [22]. The CAN blamed the Muslims for the

socio-economic problems embedding Nigeria. According to CAN the statistics in ministerial distribution, gubernatorial numbers, heads of Parastatals, directors in the Federal Ministries, and establishments show "domination" of Christians by the Muslims. Hence, all the ills and predicaments which befell the nation were a result of the corrupt, insincere, greedy and incompetent Muslim elites who considered ruling the country is their birth right.

7. Conclusion

Religion and politics some may argue, should not mix but from our discussion so far it very obvious that religion cannot be divulged of politics. We have seen how religious affiliation determined popularity in the polity. Besides their religious function, the role of the NSCIA and the CAN in the polity supposed, to foster dialogue between Islam and Christianity one hand and between these religions and the Government on the other hand and not to incite sentiments. Though these organizations have promoted cooperation among its members, through the harmonization of interest groups but they have also created problems that have cost the nation a fortune. For instance, the protest initiated by CAN during the Kaduna Shar'iah implementation cost the nation a fortune. Also, the statement made by cardinal Okojie during the OIC debate that Nigeria will rage like Lebanon if her membership of OIC is not withdrawn worsened the situation that period. It is therefore the call of the work that the representatives these religious organization to always give in to dialogue in a matter of national interest. The current scourge of Boko Haram in Nigeria today will be difficult to resolve if dialogue is not embraced. Though the NSCIA disowns Boko Haram that they are not projecting Islam, as Islam does not in any way support the killing of innocent citizens, the CAN position that government should not dialogue with them will not help the situation. As a potent voice of Islam and Christianity, and having a pride of place in Nigeria polity, it is therefore the recommendation of this paper that the two religious bodies (NSCIA & CAN) should come together and assist the government to find a lasting solution to the socio-economic and political problem of Nigeria since religion is subsumed in politics.

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