

Regionalization and Ethno-Religious Politics: Challenges to Democratic Transition in Nigeria

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Abstract

North and South are two regions that dominate Nigeria's political landscape and equally divided between Muslims and Christians respectively. The country is the populous nation in Africa and the seventh in the world ranking; with nearly twenty percent of the world black population. Since political independence, Nigeria had undergone several military interruptions until 1999 when it fully or semi-complete restored the democratic system of government. Again, the North and South regions together with Islam and Christianity, the two dominant faiths of the country, seem to perpetually implant catastrophic and bitter incidents for several decades back. Nigeria emerges as the largest oil-exporting country in the region consuming by the world's largest economy. Over the past two decades since returning to civilian rule, the democratic transition seems ineffective due to the number of reasons including the religious and regional identities. This paper examines the roles plays by religious dogmatism in Nigerian politics. It, however, aims at discovering the inevitability of cultural adherences despite the great danger surrounds should slide misinformation occur amidst process as the country is a multi-cultural environment, and independent entities with no concrete historical contacts until the amalgamation that take place somewhere in the 1914 (some 46 years only till independence).

Keywords: Religion; Region; North and South; Politicization; Shari'ah Law.

Introduction

Nigeria attained her political independence from Britain on 1st October 1960 with the bright beginning shadowed by eminent intelligent and dedicated nationalists who showed commitments and endeavors translated by their struggles to achieve higher class in the globally strongest and respectful nations. These were the vision which they sincerely tried to achieve. The eminent persons were stars but not because they were from north or south, but because they realized that they shared many things in common. That was what brought them together. They fought for the sake of their peoples with a common sentiment in order to liberalize their men, women, and children for thousands of years to come. Its natural and human resources coupled with other potentials created unconditional confidence to founding fathers that this 1960-born nation would secure undeniable space in the global political arena. That was the dream that was the vision of the then young-Nigeria.

The first frame of Nigeria's foreign policy gave more emphasis on Africa's affairs, expecting to champion Africa's domestic issues instead of depending on the former colonial occupiers. That was part of the efforts in thwarting and undermining any potential intermingling of the imperialists. Nigeria has a very important stance in international politics. It is one of the biggest contributors to the United Nations operations in restoring peaceful co-existence, particularly in Africa. Nevertheless, Nigeria is also one of the founding fathers who contrived the regional and intergovernmental body, known as Organization of African Unity (OAU), which has later on been customized to African Union (AU). The British governor-general who was in charge of administering what would become Nigeria, amalgamated northern and southern regions somewhere in 1914, in order to smooth up their administration over the territories. Until recently, in terms of economic condition, Nigeria has been doing well; as it was however the final destination for job-seekers whose mostly were from Africa and South Asia. By 1980, Nigeria has cultural and diplomatic relations with virtually all of the United Nations member countries.

Nigeria, A Country by Regional Context

Frankly, north and south are the two regions that gave birth to modern Nigeria. Before dwelling into discussion, it's very important to lay down the origin of the name 'Nigeria' how and where the name came from? According to many historians, the word Nigeria had been from river-Niger suggested by Flora Show. Since ever before, Nigeria appeared to be a place of multiethnic and multicultural society reside mainly in east, north and south areas of the country. These areas combined together emerged as single entity called "Nigeria". Before colonial invasion of Nigeria, there was no/very limited contact between the peoples living in these places, which dominantly occupy by Yoruba, Hausa-

Fulani and Igbo respectively. The tribal, religious and regional sentiments coupled with corruption seem to strongly hamper and impede economic progress in Nigeria.

Irrespective of the previous incidents that occurred few years after the independence that caused death of some of the very important figures and icons of nationalism in the first and ever civil war, Nigeria has been in political upheaval since 1999 until today. Twenty years (1999-2019) of restoring democracy for socio-economic and political impediment, the country did not achieve either of the democratic visions. The continual communal crises over the course of geographic lines, socio-religious and tribal basis and dictatorial political democratization processes pose so many questions on the possibility/impossibility of perpetual togetherness largely between north dominant Muslims and Christians southerners in a time when lack of good governance imposing numbers of threats toward the singularity of Nigeria as a state (Dagne, 2002).

Moreover, in an attempt to trace up and find properly finest solutions as cure towards prolonged strife, the then fifty-five years old independent Nigeria (as of 2014) was set to go for a dialogue between its huge ethnic nationalities through what was popularly known as “National Conference” starting from March 2014 to enable Nigerians discuss their differences and national issues seeking for common ground and grand solution to the endemic prolonging turmoil. One among so many failures of Nigeria’s democratic transition is zoning formula advocated by the then ruling party (People Democratic Party [PDP]). This means, through the platform of PDP, north and south regions should interchangeably, produce president and vice president in vice-versa after eight years (two tenures). Unfortunately, this formula almost fails to work as the crises persist even in the internal structure of the party. Over loyalties to different party members wanted to be nominated for contestations against different positions, the party faced inevitable challenge of division into new (neo-) PDP (nPDP) and old or classical PDP. As a result, it lost many of its members including governors and MPs – through the means of defection – to large opposition, All Progressive Congress (APC). Regional politics is not a new phenomenon in Nigerian politics, even before the independence, the three main zones of the country have equally divided their politics on party lines based on traditional lineages, which in other side has many things to do with culture and religion that championed the areas. It happened that both of the north and south enjoyed regional belonging far better than national integrity.

In the north for instance, multiple political groups that had been sponsored by northern elites carried along northern titles such as Northern People’s Congress (NPC), Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) are typical examples. Despite the fact that some other political parties like Action Group (AG) in the Western region (Yoruba), and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the East (Igbo) and the Midwest, included in their titles ‘national’ and ‘Nigeria’ or carried indecisively nebulous formation; they operated heavily in those regions where they won a popular support (Chapin, 1991). Regional sentiment is always being used as a metaphor for the perplexing confusion, corruption in today’s Nigerian political fate.

Religion as Identity in Nigerian Politics

Modern Nigeria emerges to be country dominated by two popular Abrahamic beliefs: Islam and Christianity, which equally divided the nation into two zones on religion-tribal lines. The rapid growing and the spread of Islam and Arabic language are seen in the northern part of the country as early as the eleventh century (Aguwa, 2005). The Fulani tribe established the centre for Islamic teaching and learning in Sokoto during the Jihad led by the great Fulani scholar, Usmanu Danfodiyo in the late eighteenth century. That was the second phase of Islamic revivalism, which as mentioned early dominants northern part of Nigeria. The move as far as Sokoto was concerned, didn’t only redressed Islam but it had also made Arabic as lingua-franca that used in administration and mean of diplomatic communications and trade relations between the then Sokoto Caliphate as well as some areas nearby (Hashim, 2009).

Similarly, in the south, the contact between the indigenous people and the Christendom Europe in the early nineteenth century through so many different means of proximity including missionaries that until today, remain a strong factor in shaping the cultural values of the region, inculcate some amount of fence between the two regions. To avoid being baptized, northern Muslims abolished *Western learning*, which popularly known as *Boko* after Sokoto Caliphate capitulated to the British armies in 1903 during the Sultan Attahiru. The defeat meant end of mere ‘Islamic ruling Caliphate’ in the region, but not anyway, ending Islam as religion of the majority.

Although scholars like Apter, 1965, Smith, 1970 and even Almond, 1960, synthesize that the modern politics that stands for secularism and modernism develops some elements to cease the dominant nature of religion in politics, but religion and forces of sectarianism continue to dictate over economic as well as political setting. According Huntington (1993), religion will, instead of decay be a determinant factor and major mechanism in shaping modern global politics. Muslim scholars and Christian clergy men become so illustriously presence in the game of Nigerian politics. During the pre-election time, religion has been used to predict the party that has the potential to win majority in a particular region or lost. This is so simple, as the party with a Muslim candidate could emerge the winner in the northeast and northwest. Similarly, a Christian candidate could be a person of preference by the Southeast and South-South peoples. The role of priests in this is now legitimization or otherwise. That is indeed one of the most cornerstones where religion finds itself in a cardinal circumstance in shaping the politics of a country as adduces by Sandler and Fox (2003). Accordingly, it is in a position of support or against a political legitimacy. In yet another incidence, though there is a strong denial by the chief administrator of a State in the South-South, but religion emerges to challenge secular state of Nigeria's politics in Rivers State.

Nyeson Wike of Rivers State tried to inculcate his political strategy by declaring Rivers as Christian State. This position was bolstered and buttressed by the men of religion of the State during the announcement. But this avowedly announcement could however, deeper threat the integrity and unity of Nigeria as a multicultural federal republic nation. In its one side, the general populace of the State chant for what might be considered a progressive development as far as dogmatism is concerned. That is championess of the Christianity in Rivers. However, the very attempt of the laity being of Wike coupled with the Bible-basher and mystic priests would always be prone to exaggerated anger and hatred between Muslim northerners and Christian southerners instead of promoting love and good governance for political stability, social well-being, mutual coexistence and economic prosperity.

Centrally, a common Nigerian person expects salvation, freedom and forwardness via political expansionism, and fighting differences such as religion, belief and culture those in reality are part of the logical existence of the country. The forces of religion always affect the outcomes of politics. They influence voting behaviours, and determine the results in some other times. Afolabi (2015) observes that the religious sentimentalism and dogmatism influence voters to vote in accordance with the particular faith they practice and region or tribe they belong to, far beyond voting a competent leader who could lead the country to the promised land, would end at voting so much incompetent somebody who may as a result galvanize so badly shambolic economy, political instability and weak institutions.

So many evidences in contemporary Nigeria's democratization and political activities prove that religion is powerful enough to ensure societal solidarity or tear it apart. For instance, during the 2015 presidential elections, the two famous strong parties (APC and PDP) competed for the highest office, almost every northern Muslim dropped PDP, the then ruling party under southern Christian, Jonathan to embrace APC the then major-opposition party with Muhammadu Buhari as presidential candidate. Regardless of whether or not the competing candidates were individually or collectively competent enough to promote the interests of the nation, the religious considerations were passively ranked top.

For many non-Muslim Nigerians, especially, in the three southern geo-political zones, Buhari was nothing but northern Muslims' messiah who comes to spiritually Islamize Nigeria and revive the implementation of the Islamic *Shari'ah* law presented by the northern governors between 1999 and 2007. Similarly, Jonathan has, for so many times been lamented and suspected that he colluded with Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in cleverly chicanery, corruption and dishonest dealings against northern Muslims. Among the popular dealings was Boko Haram, which has been allegedly bolstered by Jonathan's administration so to force northern economy, social and political chances in a state of dysfunctional quirk. This metaphoric description is applicable to any faith come to leadership in Nigeria. Hence, the factual reality is that in Nigeria as in other African nations, there is complex interplay between religion and politics as put by Tar and Shettima (2010) that religion manages to occupy a pivotal space in both private and public lives of Africans in general.

Shari'ah Law and Political Islamization: 1999-2003

The *Shari'ah* law predates colonial invasion of what is now known northern Nigeria. During those days, northern Muslims were educated in Islamic learning; practicing its teaching, and loyal to its laws. Hence, piousness and mysticism were so much famous amongst the attitudes of northern Muslim leaders, elites and even common individuals. Their allegiance to the Islamic teaching makes them declare western style of education rejected, then. They were sceptic over whatever related to the white men: science, education and technology (Ibrahim, 2018) not only because they have their own, but also because the Europeans are dominantly non Muslims, but a Christendom community whose crusade ambushes against the massively vast civilization and arts of the famous Islamic empires such as *Banu Umayyad*, *Abbaside* and *Ottoman* as well as Palestine in the 11th and 13th centuries marked as being notorious. Initially, Muslims across the Islamic world consider modern science and technology a sensitive attempt of assimilation brought about by the Christendom to proselytize or browbeat them to their values.

Similarly, northern Nigeria is enriched with culture, traditions, arts and a way of life. Therefore, they too tried to maintain both physical and moral distances between them and the Europeans. Never welcomed any sort of mix or change in their belief or religion; far away from secularism, atheism or freedom to practicing other than Islam within their boundaries:

Some Muslims in the North, where classical Quranic and Islamic education is a powerful social force, feel ambivalence toward Western-style institutions of learning. On the one hand, secondary and tertiary degrees are respected credentials, and Northerners take pride in their region's universities and colleges. On the other hand, some Northern Muslims believe Western-style schools fail to inculcate Islamic values. More so, some sects such as Boko Haram represent an extreme manifestation of this latter attitude to reject compromises such as "Islamiyya" schools that blend government curricula with religious instruction (Thurston, 2016).

This conservatively feudal nature paved the way to a clash between the indigenous northern Muslims and European Christians resulting death of thousands of peoples. By defeating northern armies; the British then managed to cajole them out of surrendering off some parts of the *Shari'ah* laws such as *Qisaas* against theft of more than quarter of *Dinar*, reforming stoning of adulterous activities, alcoholism, etc., so that the number of handicaps could be decreased down.

...the North was a high civilization, very much resembles medieval Europe and Arabia before the coming of British colonialism. Northern had the wheel, the plough, and the cart and city walls as evidence of an advanced feudal civilization that was actually far ahead of southern neighbours before the colonialism. The coming of the European halted, and then reversed that trend (Ibrahim, 2018).

The feudal nature of the region yet influences so many decisions of its people including attempt to implement the Islamic *Shari'ah* law after the embarking upon democratization in 1999. Number of factors such as Islamization of democracy in a passive resistance against merely liberal secular democracy, are pertinently connected with the implementation trials and phases; from Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, Jigawa, Kaduna, and elsewhere within the three geo-political zones of the north.

Department of International Development (DFID) highlights that the revivalism in the form of implementation of *Shari'ah* was in the first instance, launched in Gusau, Zamfara State capital of administration in 1999. This move has in 2001 – two years only, since inception – paved the way for many more northern states to follow up the same step. The states that have joined therein were Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto and Yobe states. This wave of *Shari'ah* galvanized agoraphobic tension and fear especially among the non-Muslim residents of the north. However, this initiative gave birth to *Hisbah* (a type of para-police officers) in the region, *Zakat* and *Waqf*, institutions, reposition *Ulama* and their responsibilities in the community, gender and sensitization exercises over women position as well as rights in Islam (DFID, 2016).

This type of revivalism – except for the three-year Obasanjo's military regime of 1976-1979 – is the first of its type throughout the documented history of modern Nigeria under civilian democratically elected leaderships. This development remains among the top prime concerns that attract northern people toward a system of government

'democracy' not just the contiguous contents of it. This is because many radical ideas and afterthought dogmatism that struggle in the name of God, such as *Maitatsine*, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) known as *Shi'ite* (initially Muslim Brothers), Boko Haram, etc., engage in sieges against what they interpret as secular government of infidels. They never propose lack of leadership or set themselves as proponents of the law of the nature. They claim that the government that administers affairs of the Muslims should, from the essence, be coincident with the building foundation of the Islamic teaching through the guidance of the prophet, and sound interpretation of the holy Qur'an and other sacred texts of Islamic laws and jurisprudence. For instance, in its early bid for Islamic revivalism in Nigeria, the 'Muslim Brothers' saddles on the agenda of toppling down the Nigeria's administration through a revolution similar to the one of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 1979.

Since that time until today, Iran has been conducting regular elections with full participation of the entire citizens with universal suffrage. The same processes were set by the Nigerian *shi'ite* version, the INM as one of its targets in the late 1980s and early 1990s in order to climb steeply up the presidency. Meanwhile, the idea is not about setting aside democracy as a system, but reformation with other trends matches the religious belief of the peoples of this locality. Perhaps, in this dominant Muslim area, seldom see or chose democracy as the best formula of government. Rather, this system that calls for bottomless freedom, liberty and exercises is put in the place tentatively so that it may pave the way for the possible Islamic system; desire by each and every Muslim across the region.

Religion in Politics, The Islamic View

In classical Islamic perspectives, politics is always guided by Shari'ah law, albeit, debate is heated on whether or not to separate religion from politics. Philosophically, for Muslim, Islam is a complete way of life, and total submission and surrender to the wills of Allah. Islam is a religion concerns so importantly on standard morals with very few focuses on politics. In the classical version of Islam, there is no direct discussion and or details on how to form government or state, how to manage organization or run agencies and institutions (Ayubi, 1991). But the theological subtexts and purports especially on anew risen issues, whose religious injunctions (*ahkaam*) could, most of the times be understood only through analogy or *Qiyas* using linguistic or rhetoric explanation (*bayaan*) are always there. It is in the Qur'an: "there is neither crawling creature on the earth, nor a bird that flies with its two wings, but nations like you. We have neglected nothing in the Book", (Qur'an 6: 37). This is how Muslims in Nigeria and elsewhere view political participation, as Islam never omitted an issue-type needed in day-to-day human activities such as politics and or leadership. Likewise, modernity and civilization are always welcomed by Islam unless when contradictions are observed in a relation between Islamic perspectives and the way civilization presents itself. In Nigeria, as (Ntama and Ogar, 2014) put it, Islam has constantly been going, side-by-side with politics. It largely remains a strong and reliable source of ethnic identification, unification and political mobilization in the north. However, in this region, Islam is in the position to legitimize or de-legitimize any regime in Nigeria (Ntama and Ogar, 2014).

Religion in Politics, The Christian Perspective

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which is also the supreme council of Christianity in the country, is made up of some other five micro-clusters namely: The Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Syncretistic, and Protestant. The Nigerian Christianity under the umbrella of CAN has no issue, whatsoever over the political setting of Nigeria. It tries to organize itself almost in the same shape of civil democratic way, although some overtaking as well as irregularities might operative within the formulating system, but representation and pattern of selection is entertained. According to Paden (2015), the Nigerian CAN comprises five wings including the Christian Council of Nigeria, the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, etc. This religious body has in addition, youth and women wings. 105 members that elect president are known as National Executive Council. General Assembly has 304 members (Paden, 2015). Confrontation and antagonism that often occur between Muslims and Christians in some northern states such as Plateau, Kaduna and Taraba coupled with the structuring feature of the CAN itself seem to force Christians participate and or try to dominate sensitive positions at all levels. Traditionally, this remains among many factors including quota system that give popularity to inter-faiths-zoning arrangement in the Nigeria's political leadership.

Conclusions

Perhaps, as a phenomenon, the religious-ethno-regionalism has forever overtaken any other interests including the national interest in today's Nigeria's affairs. The national concerned issues, such as security, political stability,

economic growth, prosperity and national unity are being overpowered by cupidity so that the needs, wants and satisfactions of a clique and caprice of individuals could be met. Lives and properties of innocent Nigerian citizens have become inconsequentially picayune. Trade for wealth is proved by the bloodshed, social oppressions, insurgencies and other abhorrent activities. This tradition is quickly getting worse in an uncontrolled way, whereas black market in the name of religion and or region becomes a powerful challenge. More or so, the quality of leadership in Nigeria is always being calculated based on either religion or region a candidate belongs to, not their competent capacities to deliver responsibilities or even manage their portfolios.

Recommendations

It is recommended that in order to maintain permanent unity of Nigeria, religion and region should be given special considerations by restructuring it into an inter-governmental or confederate state, whereby group of the 36 states that are united not to form federation this time, but to retain more of their individual sovereignties than they give up to the central government. Just like Switzerland or today's European Union. Both Muslims and Christians should, without prejudice be allowed to represent their faiths through political groupings simply because most of the risen conflicts occur as tactics means to safeguard religion or faith. By so doing, Muslims in the north can now form a party that can go side by side with Islam, likewise in the south where Christianity dominates religious affairs of the people. However, language is another important factor helps in maintaining peace and cohesiveness in a heterogeneous environment like Nigeria. Thus, Hausa should be treated as official language at least in the north, Igbo and Yoruba in East and West respectively. Whereupon in the National Assembly where all ethnic nationalities come together to formulate and make law for the people they represent, all of these major lingual groups should be declared official. A Hausa representative has the choice to use Hausa, Arabic or English. Similarly, Igbo and Yoruba communities can adopt the mother tongue or English as alternative language of communication. This would force the feeling of superiority or inferiority, domination, marginalization, etc., to disappear. It is however, recommended that the rule of law and due processes upon government affairs with social justice and political inclusion should be maintained and entertained.

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