

OBIORA IKE

NIGERIA BETWEEN FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND GROWING ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

There is no shortage of pronouncements that the inalienable and fundamental rights to freedom of conscience and religion for persons as enshrined in international constitutions, covenants, statutes and the United Nations Charter of 1948 are seriously undermined and threatened in Africa's most populated country, Nigeria.

Rising cases of persecution of persons for religious reasons particularly Christians increases with the daily news and the statistics indicate shocking but very serious revelations - with over 100,000 people killed in ten years due to religiously motivated killings – (the highest in any country in the world at this time). Nigeria is not at war with another country and has never been. However, the northern parts of the country with the Boko Haram terrorist organization, the Fulani herdsmen now called “Bandits” and some Muslim religious fanatics have followed the paths of the politicians who in year 2000 tried to undermine democracy in Nigeria by forcefully and contrary to the Federal constitution pushing through the Sharia law upon 12 States of the country.

This action has fuelled bigotry, hatred, ignorance, religious fanaticism, Islamic expansionism, land-grabbing ambitions to displace indigenous traditional and Christian owners in a politically tele-guided acrimony designed to instrumentalize religion for their purposes. The President, Mohammed Buhari is an avowed Islamic fundamentalist who has used his presidency to institutionalise Muslim and Northern political hegemony over the rest of the country through political appointments to the entire Military and Security outfits, the civil service, political positions, the economy and even international positions.

There is evident and urgent reason to see the gradual but speedy “talibanization” and islamisation policies taking place in Nigeria at this time. The country is the most populated country on the African continent with a growing population of well over 210 million people. Nigeria is largely multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi religious with over 400 languages showcasing diversity in a territory of contradictions and possibilities. The country is inhabited by people of indigenous African Bantu origins, but migrations have happened over decades with Africans from other backgrounds including Fulani nomads, immigrants from inter-African commercial dealings and persons of Arab and Caucasian background settling in the country and for much of this period, people had lived peacefully inhabiting the country. There are an estimated 80 million Muslims and 80 million Christians with the rest adherents to the traditional African Religions. Catholics are the majority of the Christian population.

With the largest number of Muslims living in any one country of Africa and the largest number of Christians living in the same country, the colonial era under the British decentralised the management of the country so that each section could live with their own traditions and systems. Under the Military since 1966 and increasingly, a centralised form

of government has emerged, and the Muslim elite use this apparatus as a cover to rule over the rest of the entire population with religious and cultural bias of their world views. The country under civilian administrations has suffered a void of good leadership and a civil war broke out in 1967 between the mainly Christian populated south eastern parts (then known as Biafra) and the rest of the largely Muslim parts of Northern Nigeria. Over Two million people, mainly children died during the Biafra civil war, the effects of which are still evident. There are enormous mineral resources and vibrant hardworking people involved in making the country and Africa great, yet, Islamic fanaticism continues to draw the country on the brink of disaster.

In 1985, a military dictator, Mr Ibrahim Babangida surreptitiously smuggled Nigeria against the will of the majority of the citizens into the forceful membership of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) which action increased the polarizations, conflicts on religious affiliations, suspicions of Islamization and the current full blown attempt by the dominant political Muslim elite to impose the Islamic legal, religious, cultural and social systems into the mainstreams of public life in the entire country.

In 1999, 12 out of the 36 states that make up the Federation of Nigeria and contrary to the letters and spirit of the Federal constitution of the Republic simultaneously legislated to adopt the Islamic Sharia against the secular constitution on which Nigeria was founded at the very beginning. By thus proclaiming themselves "Sharia governed States" and imposing the Sharia Islamic jurisprudence in both personal and criminal law upon their citizenry, this action has heightened tensions and suspicions across the country, causing more deaths of innocent citizens, wanton destruction of property and livelihoods including places of divine cult and worship.

There is disruption of the peace within the social space and many Christians have fled their places of abode as their churches and homes are destroyed. These acts of arson, rape of women are criminal yet, the Law enforcement agencies beyond public condemnations have not managed to assuage or bring the situation under control, thus the suspicion that there is a conspiracy by Government, largely controlled by Muslim political elite and security forces with their intelligence to condone this illegality and effrontery.

In some cases, there is tacit encouragement of government officials at the highest levels as is evidenced under the current President Muhammadu Buhari (2015 – date) to condone perpetrators such as the Fulani Herdsmen who contravene the Laws of the land and carry heavy weapons and machinery while moving about with their cattle, causing mayhem and forcing indigenous citizens into refugee status through internal displacement and land grabbing. The rising cases of international migrations are linked directly to these forms of insecurity.

Cities in the once peaceful middle Belt of the country with a large population of Christians and traditional non-Muslim populations are under tremendous pressure threat to vacate

their homes. The ravaging Fulani Herdsmen who are nomads with cattle in recent times have invaded towns, villages and homes in places like Jos in the Plateau, Kogi, Benue, Nassarawa, Taraba and Adamawa States. The entire North eastern part of Nigeria is experiencing a group of terrorists who called themselves "Sunnah Lid-Da'wahwa'l-Jihad(Group of the People of Sunnah for Preaching Jihad) and commonly known as Boko Haram. Boko haram means "western or "non-islamic" education is sin. The agenda of the group is to impose Islamic law as the only in Nigeria and they follow Sunni Islam.

Terrorism hiding behind the group known as Boko Haram has increased the tension with the escalation in deaths of innocent citizens, destructions of property and general insecurity. The United States intelligence (FBI) has added to its list of terror and dangerous organisations world-wide the Al Qaida; the Al Shabab; Boko Haram and a branch of the Fulani Herdsmen who were cattle nomads but some have joined in unleashing terror and taking over peoples lands of natives through land grabbing and displacements of indigenous persons, often Christian populations and traditional natives. Most surprising in all this is that in no single case since the past thirty years was anybody held accountable or responsible - a clear sign of the complicity of the government of Nigeria, as already mentioned, currently controlled by Muslim elites, military personnel and intelligence.

While Christian church groups and moderate Muslims and civil society groups in Nigeria preach peace and coexistence, this appeal must be sustained. The International community especially in Europe, the USA and the United nations cannot look away from the ongoing contradictions of the tenets of religious liberty, freedom of conscience and covenants upon which the United Nations and its member states have set human rights and democratic standards for the global community.

In a country where the agenda of Islamization and religious fanaticism using the Islamist terror groups are being assisted by government officials within the system to establish a firm foothold in Africa's most populous country by ethnically cleansing Christians, in the Middle Belt and overall in the southern parts of Nigeria cannot be allowed to continue. . Violence linked to religion contradict the tenets of most religions as it is believed that religions teach peace, promote life, abhor killings of persons irrespective of their faith persuasions and promote harmony. Religious peace and coexistence is often the foundation for all other freedoms and liberties.

There is an urgent and crucial call to the international community to focus on Nigeria, currently growing on ethnic intolerance, terrorism and State sponsored religious fundamentalism before it is too late. The migration and security issues and its conflagration for the globe would be too much to handle aside humanitarian crisis in the event of full blown confrontation. The Catholic Bishops conference of Nigeria and the Christian Association of Nigeria, moderate Muslims, the Vatican and some enlightened voices continue to call for mutual understanding, peace, stability and progress in Africa's largest economy and most populated country.

Unfortunately, Christians and many others in Nigeria feel that the West, businesses, the international community and its diplomacy are standing aloof and watching without engagement, pressure on government and educational intervention including all-round attempts at poverty eradication and sustainable development efforts left unchecked, cataclysmic consequences may follow as the clouds of patience are already running out by the civil populace who do not wish to stand by without adequate self-defence for their lives, their faith and their livelihoods.