

# **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA- EXTREMISM AND GOVERNMENT INACTIONS**

**BY**

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Globally, there is hardly any country that is entirely devoid of religious influences. Historical accounts of how dissimilar groups in race, religion, ethnicity, social class, etc, can live in harmony has remained a concern of humanity, thus making countries involved to work out formulae for peaceful co-existence. Nigeria is one of the most religiously diversified with the people practicing three main religions: Christianity, Islam and Traditional religion. However, the two most dominant religions are Islam and Christianity and with their arrival asserted themselves by dislodging the traditional religions of the various tribes and communities..

Religion has to do with belief and pattern of worship by certain groups of people. In all societies religion tends to serve as an instrument of cohesion, unity and progress. Since the inception of the Nigerian nation state, Nigerian governments in the past, seem to have made concerted efforts to propagate policies and programmes that are geared towards ensuring Religious freedom. This follows the constitutional stipulations of freedom of religion and worship enveloped in the religious secularity of Nigeria.

Religious freedom has to do with the unhindered opportunity that individuals have or ought to have in order to exercise their religious beliefs and worship of whatever they believe in. Freedom of religion is considered by many people and most nations to be a fundamental human right. Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remain poor, with both state and societal perpetrated violations. This however prompted former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to designate Nigeria as a "Country of Particular Concern" for religious freedom.

On the other hand, extremism is when a person Christian or Muslim displays tendencies of intolerance towards people of the same or other religious beliefs and acts towards them in ways that threaten the peace and stability of the individual, group or society.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria maintains a delicate balance between Muslims and Christians. The apparent religious sentiments and sectarianism manifest in religious loyalties and intolerance seem

to fueled insecurity and thus constitute a huge hindrance to social cohesion among the various religious groups in Nigeria.

### **Incidents of Religious extremism in Nigeria**

- a. Nigeria's membership of OIC which is against the secularity enshrined in the constitution.
- b. Application of Sharia in Northern Nigeria, to citizens and foreign nationals who are not Muslims by faith.
- c. Spillover of religious affairs into government decisions leading to poor government domestic and international policies.
- d. Over emphasis on Sharia Law in the Nigeria's constitution.
- e. Lack of social justice or fair equality of opportunity for all to thrive in their identified areas of strength.

### **Religious extremism and Government inactions in Nigeria**

Religious freedom in Nigeria appears to be undermined by Religious extremism and government inactions. Some of the manifestations include disparaging publications by different religious groups such as Christian and Muslim, wrong perception of other people's religion or faith, wrong religious orientation, the low literacy level of religious adherents and general public pervasive poverty amongst others seem to be responsible for ethno-religious intolerance in Nigeria.

The resultant effect is the heightened religious intolerance which has become more violent with more devastating results using the militias as the executors of religious agenda characterized by an increase in number of religious crises in Nigeria. This is occasioned by religious bigotry resulting to prejudice, lack of cordiality, and mutual suspicion among the members of various religious groups. Nigeria seems to have witnessed series of religious crises that tend to elevate political instability, communal violence and religious insurgency.

It appears that the Muslims across Africa wish to take over Nigeria through full Islamization. The alleged Islamic conversion campaigns is championed via Jihad wherein 'the Muslim fundamentalists' view adherents of other faiths as infidels worthy of Islamic conversion thereby causing religious tensions in Nigeria.

Thus, the inability of the various religious groups to understand and tolerate each other has resulted to devastating conflicts leading to loss of lives and property in Nigeria (Ezeh, 1999). The worrisome is the importation of foreign concerns to the local relationship as seen in the Kano clash between Muslims and Christians over denial of Ahmed Deedat, opportunity to preach in South Africa and acceptance of Bonke in Kano.

The introduction of Islamic Legal Code (Popularly known as the Sharia Law) by the then governor Ahmed Yerima, of Zamfara state in 1999 resulted to violent protests (Abimboye, 2009). This escalated in 2000 when the then Governor Ahmed Makarfi initiated the process of introducing the same law in Kaduna State. Evidently, Nigerians have waited too long for the violence orchestrated by Religious intolerance to stop, rather it has been escalating. Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria deteriorated over the past decade. In fact, the ongoing attacks against Christian communities, Muslim congregations, and houses of worship in most parts of the North East and North Central geopolitical zones of Nigeria is very worrisome. There are reports that more than 600 students have been abducted from schools in northwest Nigeria since December, 2020 till date. These abductions, perpetrated by armed criminal gangs, resemble tactics commonly employed by Boko Haram and other militant Islamist groups in northern Nigeria.

Adamawa chairman of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was kidnapped and executed by Boko-Haram terrorist but the government in Nigeria did little or nothing to save the situation. Similarly, a Catholic Priest (late Rev. Fr. Alphonsus) of Sokoto Diocese was gruesomely murdered by bandits and nothing was done to punish the culprits. All these build up high level of mutual suspicion, rivalry, acrimony, discord and hostility amongst the religious adherents.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Religious intolerance is responsible for political instability in Nigeria. This is perhaps because; the political leaders have seen religion as veritable tools to manipulate the vulnerable masses of the society. In the light of the above, there is need to revive national consciousness, re-orientate the people and Nigerians should imbibe spirit of tolerance of each other's religious leanings and shift their loyalties to the national constitution government to engender national integration.