

Appendix 54:

Sharia: the Politics of Control

By Emman Usman Shehu, Post Express (Lagos), 28 September and 5 October 2000

[Publisher's note: This represents only the first and third part of a multi-part series. The other parts are not available.] [Boer's note: Part 3 below is the same as Part 1! I have left it there to convince you.]

Part 1

Lagos—The effectiveness of Sharia as a potent tool of political control can best be appreciated when seen at close quarters. Some of the references already made are located way back in the cellars of history and coated with the dust and grime of inaccessibility. We therefore require a reference that has immediacy without losing relevance.

Fortunately there is a six-year period in our history that cannot be overlooked for various reasons. One of such reasons touches on our subject of discourse. Between October 1, 1960 and January 15, 1966, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, ruled over Northern Nigeria as the Premier. His six-year tenure is interesting in several ways.

The recent sharia uproar has had the name of Ahmadu Bello featuring regularly. He has been referred to for three reasons. First, that he was instrumental in getting the penal code formulated. Two, that he ruled so benevolently that he was able to accommodate non-Muslims in the North. Third, that he fashioned the one North which must not be broken at all costs. There are other reasons for the major position Ahmadu Bello enjoys in the contemporary history of the North. They all have a common link, that of political control.

Ahmadu Bello was a great grandson of the legendary Shehu Usman Dan Fodio. Bello drew more than a passing inspiration from Fodio, including the desire of becoming the Sultan of Sokoto. But as it is well known wishes are not always horses. For Bello therefore, this was one wish that was never fulfilled. Fate provided Bello with an alternative platform. Thus when he became the Premier of the North, he already had at the back of his mind some well thought out objectives. The issue of the penal code provides an interesting insight. Bello had wanted aspects of sharia which the British had suspended to be returned. However there was an outcry from the non-

Muslim community. It was a serious outcry. Ignoring it would mean serious crisis and possibly the break up of the North. He was therefore astute enough to realise that a short-term compromise was expedient.

The impression has been created by most commentators that Bello willingly agreed to the demand of the non-Muslims. It is not true. In fact it took some threat from the British before he backpedalled on enforcing total sharia. Professor Osuntokun makes a revealing reference to this issue in *Power Broker*, a biography on Sir Kashim Ibrahim, the governor of Northern Nigeria. Thus the penal code was given birth to as a compromise.

Bello did not have his way with making supreme sharia the law of the North, but his actions continued to betray the intention because of the absolute control it afforded him. He was astute enough to allow a handful of non-Muslims to rise to positions of prominence. This created the impression of an accommodating person. But it was a different matter when it came to relating to the non-Muslim communities.

A close reading of all the books written on Bello confirm that for him there was no difference between politics and religion. Hence, political campaigns were also an opportunity for proselytising. In this way several communities were converted by his mere pronouncing it. In the autobiography *That We May Be One*, Ambassador Jolly Tanko Yusuf makes the following observation: Sir Bello and his aides openly used religion for political purposes. So brazen was his abuse of office that toward the end of his life, Bello spent more time and effort 'Islamising' than as premier of Northern Nigeria and president of the Northern People's Congress. He used government planes, vehicles and other facilities openly and freely for his religious campaigns.

Yusuf goes on to add that some courageous members (of government) including myself, strongly criticised this misuse of government facilities. Even though we knew there was not much we could do, we felt we had to speak out as loyal citizens. The Sardauna of Sokoto even set up a secret committee after his return from the Middle East (a solid Islamic bloc) in 1964 to find alternative ways and means of Islamising the whole North. Thus was born the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI, the People's Association). It is against this background that the recent pronouncements of the JNI under the auspices of Sultan Maccido should be considered.

I have quoted Yusuf a bit extensively because of his credibility. He was one of those that Bello artfully used to give a semblance of fairness in his handling of non-Muslims. Yusuf grew up in a Muslim family in the Middle Belt, but later became a Christian and rose to positions of prominence under Sardauna. After Sardauna's death he became Nigeria's ambassador to Germany, China, North Vietnam, Korea and Sierra-Leone. In the twilight of his years he has come to realise the extent to which people like him were hoodwinked and used in the name of the North. The desire to foist one religion all over the North did not die with Bello. In fact it has become a legacy bequeathed to most administrators, whether civilian or military, in several Northern states. Thus all the facilities of government are directed to this purpose.

In the realm of politics, Bello did not treat his political opponents with kids' gloves. The state apparatus was used against them. The emirs, chiefs as well as the native authority officials were all mobilised to deal with political opponents be they NEPU or UMBC followers. It was the standard operation for NEPU followers to be arraigned before alkali courts on trumped up charges. Some were able to wriggle out by denying that they were not Muslims. Since what operated then was not supreme sharia, they were able to get away with it. Today, with such loopholes plugged by Sani Ahmed and his co-travellers, there would be no means of escape.

Thus by manipulating sharia, Ahmadu Bello was able to control and create a Northern identity and solidarity which in reality was a continuation of the 1804 project started by his great grandfather. By instilling the fear of Southern domination in the minds of most Northerners, he was able to present himself as the defender of the North. Unfortunately like the Habe rulers before them, and like Obasanjo today, several Northerners especially non- Muslims were so naive that they were hoodwinked. They failed to see the sleight-of-hand which was using sharia to create a political and religious kingdom for the feudal class. The current rumbling in the North amongst the Middle-Belters and the non-Muslims from the upper North, is because of the understanding and discernment brought about by the marginalisation which they have suffered over the years in the name of one Islamic North.

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Part 3 XXXX

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