

Sharia: The historical, political and diplomatic dimensions

FOR the past several months, the decision to implement Sharia law in Zamfara has been at the centre of Nigerian public discourse. Zamfara jumped from being a barely known peripheral state to the centre of debates about religion, politics, federalism and the very future of the Nigerian State both inside and outside Nigeria.

Although the media – local and international – has given the issue much attention, President Obasanjo himself has largely ignored it, perhaps in an attempt to prevent it from becoming a bigger deal than it had already become.

I was present at Obasanjo's lecture at Harvard University where, at least up to now, he made his only public statement regarding Sharia. His response was rather nonchalant, almost as if he did not see it as a serious issue. Now, with Kano following Zamfara's lead, and with Yobe soon to follow, Sharia in Nigeria is a serious issue, which no one can ignore.

You may ask, as I have asked myself, what can I, who am not even in Nigeria, contribute to a debate that has certainly already been endlessly discussed throughout all facets of

Nigerian society? As I hope to continue to do through this column, I wish here to present insights that my position as a Nigerian-American based abroad and studying African History at one of the world's leading universities might allow me the unique opportunity to offer.

Let me begin with history, my field of study. In the 1780s, Sarkin Gobir declared to the other leaders of the Hausa states that he had made a mistake by openly and hospitably admitting the community of Fulani Muslim scholars who were becoming a dominant force in his territory. He is said to have commented, "A fire has started which we cannot put out. I made a mistake."

Twenty five or so years later, a fire swept Sarkin Gobir and the other Hausa rulers away, and what would become the Sokoto Caliphate was born in the midst of Usman Dan Fodio's *jihād*. This is to say that what is happening now is not something to be taken lightly, and the religious roots of any movement make it far stronger than most politicians, especially those from a different religion, realize.

When politicians took over the leadership of the movement, Dan Fodio and the other scholars quickly became disenchanted because those in charge were no longer committed to governing through a firm grasp of centuries of Islamic law, theology, and wisdom. This time around, Islamic law is being implemented by politicians themselves, and one can only hope that they are being guided by men and women as learned as the great Dan Fodio.

Now, to the wisdom of my father. My father, a long time missionary in Northern Nigeria, is writing a book on Christian – Moslem relations



•Obasanjo

in Nigeria. He has done his best to write the book honouring the Christian and Moslem perspectives equally. To his surprise, he found as much a fear of Christian domination of Nigeria in the Moslem literature as the fear expressed of Moslem domination in Christian literature. In short, both sides fear each other, even while both sides fail to talk to each other frankly and openly about those fears.

To Christians, the prospect of Sharia law governing a number of states in Nigeria confirms their fear that Moslems are trying to take over. However, they need to keep in mind that the secular, Westernized, democratic system under which Nigeria is governed is perceived as a means of Christian control by many Moslems. Christians may find this absurd, especially considering that the state is supposed to be secular. But to Moslems, and they are probably more right about this, there is no such

thing as a secular state (especially in Africa). Considering that the model of the Nigerian state system comes from the (post) Christian West, it certainly smirks of Christianity to someone coming from another perspective.

One of the major shortcomings of the post-colonial (and colonial) African state has been the failure of the imposed and improvised secular governing systems to come to grips with the importance of religion to all aspects of African life. This is why South Africa, one of the most fully industrialized and Westernized African countries, has laws addressing witchcraft. This is also why Nigeria, another industrialized and Westernized country, is being confronted with the possibility of Sharia laws. Muslims are simply trying to find a space for their way of life and belief within a secular structure, which Islam does not recognize.

Of course, that is the interpretation in a perfect world not open to the machinations

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of politicians and opportunists. After all, as Majek Fashek sang, "*Religion na politics*." If Sharia law in Zamfara, Kano, Yobe and elsewhere would truly not negatively affect non-Moslems (or Moslems not interested in it), then by all means it should be fully adopted with haste.

However, we are living in a globalized world where even the most obscure corner is full of diversity. Although the international media may still be under the impression that Northern Nigeria is all Moslems and Southern Nigeria is all-Christian, anyone who knows Nigeria understands how intermixed the country really is religiously. Non-Moslems in Zamfara are already being affected negatively, even if as yet only by small matters like the difficulties non-Muslim women are facing securing access to public transport. Such problems are likely to increase, and will be felt even stronger in Kano, a state with a much greater percentage of

non-Moslems. Aside from the obvious internal tensions this will create, there are now also potential international dimensions involved.

Nigeria is already far along the road of changing her image from being a pariah nation towards one fully integrated into the international community. To continue on that path, and to continue to attract foreign investors, the last thing Nigeria needs now is to be labeled as a fundamentalist Islamic State. This would be especially ironic considering that Nigeria's President is a 'born-again' Christian. Human rights has become a major issue in international relations, and now, at least from the American perspective, religious liberty is an important dimension of those rights.

In October 1998 the United States Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act in a rare unanimous vote. By signing the Act into law, Bill Clinton established an office within

the State Department directed by an Ambassador-at-large whose task it is to monitor religious freedom worldwide.

The Office on International Religious Freedom now publishes an annual report, which describes violations of religious liberty or acts of religious persecution around the world, regardless of the religion involved. If a country is listed as a violator, the American president is required to select a response from a means of options ranging from diplomatic protests to economic sanctions.

William Inboden, a former congressional staff member who played an instrumental role in conceptualizing, drafting, and implementing the bill, commented that at this stage, Nigeria is not considered to be a severe violator of religious liberty. He went on to note that "To be cited as a violator, incidents do not have to occur throughout a country, and Nigeria is already drawing attention from the watchdog groups who monitor religious freedoms. There will certainly be scrutiny from the Office on International Religious Freedoms, especially if Sharia spreads to a number of states." In short, in the long run, the spread of Sharia in Nigeria could affect Nigeria's relations with one of her most important trading partners and, therefore, her general stand in the international community.

In conclusion, The Sharia debate in Nigeria is far more than just a political or religious issue, but calls into question the very future of the Nigerian state as it now stands and its position in the international community. The opportunity has now presented itself for an in depth, honest, and open debate between Nigerians of all religious persuasions regarding the role of religion in the state. The debate could end up tearing Nigeria apart—hopefully the last thing on most people's agendas. On the other, from a more positive view, it could lead to Nigeria finding solutions to the age-old problems facing the secular state in religious Africa. I earnestly pray for the latter.