

The Politics of Religion and the Underdevelopment of Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

It has been observed that northern Nigeria is highly backward and underdeveloped. It is however, interesting to know that it is the politics of religion that has been responsible for this dearth of development in the region. The leaders and elites of northern extraction have over the years, abandoned majority of the people to Islamic system of education, as this offers an unchallenged access to the possible embezzlement of entire treasury meant for the development of the region. Hence, religion seems to have been used as a tool of corruption and exploitation. This paper therefore, attempts to critically analyze the politics of religion as the major cause of the underdevelopment of the northern region. Using the Historical Phenomenological method of analysis, it was discovered that religion is used to keep the northern majority ignorant, non-resistant, docile, subservient, poor and perpetually dependent. It was, however, recommended among other things, that the Quranic system of education be scrapped entirely or structurally modified to include the modern western education in the region.

Keywords: Northern leaders, Poverty, Underdevelopment, Politics, Religion, Nigeria.

Introduction

The level of poverty and underdevelopment of the northern part of Nigeria is incredible. The region is at the bottom of virtually all the indices of development like education, health, economy, infrastructural development and so on. Omale (2008) has rightly observed that “the north is empty economically, backward academically, and visionlessly violent-ridden”. Poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, disease and death seem to have become extremely rampant in the region. And it has risen to the level that has drawn international attention several times. According to the 2012 Report of the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), 7 out of 10 young women aged 20-29 in North-West Nigeria are unable to read or write, compared to about 1 out of 10 young women in the South-East; while maternal mortality rate in the North-East is 1,549 deaths per 100,000 women, which is three times above the National average of 549 deaths (Usman 2012). This is despite the seemingly unbridled access the Northern elites have had to political offices in the country right from independence. Or should a mention be made of the fact that these 19 states that constitute this region have governors, commissioners, and local government chairmen? This has kept people wondering on the actual cause of the situation, as there have been countless complaints from fellow

citizens. Successive Northern leaders have ruled and gone with less developmental effects on the region. Yet, very few or nobody asked questions, however, until recently with the rise of some violent upheavals and awareness in the region. It is to this extent that the politics of religion is held as the main cause of the prolonged underdevelopment of the North. Religion seems to have been used as a tool by these “respected” Northern elites to keep the Northern natives non-resistant, docile, subservient and dependent. Majority of the people seem to have been indoctrinated, made to be helplessly contented and restricted to Quranic education only, while these elites were exposed to Western education and the attendant socio-economic benefits. The idea is that, since the Northern leaders and elites have the wherewithal to discontinue this monolithic Quranic Education System and the attendant effects, but have done nothing about it, it goes to establish that it has been a deliberate act of dishonesty and exploitation.

The objective of this paper therefore, is to critically analyze the politics of religion as responsible for the underdevelopment of Northern Nigeria. A historical phenomenological method of analysis was adopted to achieve this objective.

Poverty And Underdevelopment In The Northern Nigeria

The level of poverty in Nigeria is overwhelming. However, it is indeed more repugnant and overwhelming in the Northern part of the country. According to the report of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), while the poverty rate in Nigeria between 2004 and 2010 has risen to 69%, “the North-West and North-East geopolitical zones recorded the highest poverty rate in Nigeria with 77.7% and 76.3% respectively” (Subair 2012). The rate of poverty recorded by each state in the North was reported to include Sokoto 81.2%, Katsina 74.5%, Adamawa 74.2%, Gombe 74.2%, Jigawa 74.1%, Plateau 74.1%, Bauchi 73%, Kebbi 72%, and Zamfara 70.8% (www.thisdaylive.com). Whereas, poverty rate in Southern Nigeria is comparatively lower “as poverty in South-West is 49.8%, South-South 55.5%, and South-East is 59.5% (Kayode 2013).

This high level of poverty in the North has made some persons want to give poverty in Nigeria “a Northern face” (www.nairaland.com). According to Governor Mu’azu Babangida Aliyu of Niger State, “Nigeria’s poverty rating index would have been better if the North was moving in the same pace with the Southern part of the country” (www.news.naij.com). Also, the former CBN Governor, Professor Chukwuma Soludo, the current Governor of CBN, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi and the former President of the US, Bill Clinton have on different occasions attested to the fact that poverty is an issue of the North.

Furthermore, at the Northern Nigeria Economic and Investment Summit held with the World Bank on June 2011 in Abuja, Professor Ibrahim Gambari reportedly lamented the poverty level of the North using grim statistics. On health, he said “the level of immunization of children against dangerous childhood diseases in the South-East is 44.6% immunization coverage, but the North-West has 3.7%; while on the education of the girl-child, South-East has enrolment rate of 85%, South-West 85%, and South-South 75%, while the North-East and North-West have 20% and 25% respectively (Ujah and Binniyat 2011).

Now, considering the above grim statistics and comments, one begin to wonder if the North had leaders who were of the same extraction as these majority roaming in the darkness of poverty, destitution, illiteracy and gross ignorance. Interestingly, however,

this pitiable region has produced wealthy elites of Northern extraction who are deeply “disconnected from the ordinary people and their plight”. Little wonder Usman (2012) passionately decried the “atrocious inequality in the North”. In a very witty but realistic manner, Hussain (2008) aptly described the chasm between the rich and the poor majority in the North, thus;

On the streets of most of the cities and towns of Northern Nigeria are multiple streams of school age children roaming about with begging bowls if they are boys and with tray loads balanced on their heads selling trifles if they are girls. If they are youths, aged 20 and above or thereabout, the males are likely to be selling petrol measured in jerry cans in the black market or loafing idly and the females will have small or big basins doling out food to buyers in the streets. Those middle-aged or older reclining tiredly on mats spread in street corners are likely to be beggars with no discrimination to gender.

On the same streets, he continued;

The latest brand of hummers, luxury Honda or Mercedes cars sure to draw a long glance will be pouring softly as it traverses pot-hole-filled roads with its expensively dressed occupants. In virtually every street, even in the poorest neighborhoods, there will be the usual big mansion looming over dilapidated houses that have seen better days.

This adequately captures the two worlds found in the North; one of abject poverty, disease and illiteracy and the other of stupendous wealth, sophistication and opulence.

The Northern Elites And Northern Underdevelopment

The level of poverty and underdevelopment in the Northern part of Nigeria is no doubt, a serious indictment on the Northern elites. Brennan (2012) has out rightly stated that “the Northern leaders are the cause of underdevelopment in the North”. The Arewa Youths Forum (AYF) in a communiqué on 8th July 2013 unanimously blamed the elites from the Northern region for the dearth of economic and educational development in the North. The meeting held in Kaduna, capital of Kaduna State. According to the leader, Gambo Ibrahim Gujungu;

The leadership of Arewa Youths Forum (AYF) met and critically reviewed the state of the nation and most importantly, the predicament bedeviling Northern Nigeria. Sadly, as we stated in March 2012, the North is still at the bottom of every index ranging from health, education, social amenities, infrastructure, socio-cultural integration and peaceful co-existence....and from our review of the 19 Northern states, except in (a) few states, the order of the day is outright embezzlement of public funds with impunity. The leadership being showcased at all levels of government is nothing but a monumental sharing of public funds.... (www.saharareporters.com).

And this is done at the expense of the majority of the people in the region, who are left to wallow in poverty, illiteracy and ignorance. Jimoh (2013) has observed that “Northern Nigeria over the years has been traumatized by decisions taken by the few rich and influential citizens who prefer to be worshipped by the largely complacent, abjectly poor

and ignorant majority”, while Omale (2008) has argued that “a typical Northern politician or ‘bigman’ is more concerned about his political and economic relevance than the economic wellbeing of his people”. Bennan (2012) argues that these leaders are self-centered and only seek for their personal development-how do you expect the North to progress? These claims are further buttressed by the fact that the North has had a seemingly unbridled access to the leadership of the country for over 30years out of 53years of the country’s existence. It is not therefore wrong to hold the northern leaders responsible for the underdevelopment of the North. To be sure, the following are the historical breakdown:

Table: showing the Northern Access to Leadership in Nigeria

	Leaders	Profile	Duration	Region
1	Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	The Prime Minister of the First Republic (He was born in 1912 and died in 1966)	October 1st 1960 - January 15th, 1966.	North
2	Nnamdi Azikiwe	The First President (He was born in 1904 and died On May 11, 1996)	1 October 1960 to 16 January 1966	East
3	J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi	The First Military Head of State (He was born on March 3, 1924 and died on July 29, 1966)	16 January 1966 to 29 July 1966	East
4	Yakubu Gowon	The Second Military Head of State (He was born on October 19, 1934)	1 August 1966 to 29 July 1975	North
5	Murtala Mohammad	The Third Military Head of State (He was born on November 8, 1938 and died on February 13, 1976)	29 July 1975 to 13 February 1976	North
6	Olusegun Obasanjo	The Fourth Military Head of State (He was born on March 5, 1937)	13 February 1976 to 1 October 1979	West
7	Shehu Shagari	The First Executive President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (He was born on February 25, 1925)	1 October 1979 to 31 December 1983	North
8	Muhammadu Buhari	Head of State (He was born on December 17, 1942)	31 December 1983 to 27 August 1985	North
9	Ibrahim Babangida	Nigeria Military President (He was born on August 17, 1941)	27 August 1985 to 26 August 1993	North
10	Ernest Shonekan	The Head State (He was born on May 9, 1936)	26 August 1993 to 17 November 1993	West
11	Sani Abacha	The Head of State (He was born on September 20, 1943 and died on June 8, 1998)	17 November 1993 to 8 June 1998	North
12	Abdulsalami Abubakar	The Head of State (He was born on June 13, 1942)	8 June 1998 to 29 May 1999	North
13	Olusegun Obasanjo	President of Nigeria (He was born on March 5, 1937)	29 May 1999 to 29 May 2007	West
14	Umaru Musa Yaradua	President (He was born August 16, 1951 and died on May 5, 2010)	29 May 2007 to 5 May 2010	North
	Goodluck Jonathan	President (May 6, 2010 till date. He was Vice President and became the Acting President. He later became the President after the death of Yar’adua. He was born on November 20, 1957)	5 May 2010 till date	South

Source: Authors’ Founding

It should be noted from the table that the North out-numbers other regions both in the number of leaders and duration of leadership.

It is a common knowledge in Nigeria that sentimental and subjective politics, characterized by tribalism obtains on regional basis. This goes to suggest that anybody who emerges as the military ruler or democratic president, as the case may, be will usually have the development of his region as his priority. But, this has not been the case with some of the Northern rulers/leaders. Instead, personal aggrandizement, manifested in corrupt accumulation of wealth, has characterized their regimes. Even, when their regimes are assessed or appraised generally in respect to national development without paying attention to their supposed responsibilities to the regional origin, some, if not all, are still indicted. Yet, this has not affected their inherent crave for political leadership and dominance. Abubakar (2013) has rendered thus;

It is no secret that the urge to lead has always been an inbuilt attribute of the typical Northerner...(and) when the history of Nigeria is being unfold, posterity will remember no region like it would, the North. This is so because history had been so generous to it up to a level of biasiness. Right from inception, Northerners have been so lucky to have been at the helm of affairs of the country for the large part of Nigeria's history.

Yet, there is nothing tangible to show, as there are poor health care systems, dilapidated infrastructures and deplorable state of education in several parts of the North. The state governors, in the region have not helped matters, as their respective administrations are inundated with gross embezzlement, neglect, and misappropriation of public funds. Unlike the era of Sir Ahmadu Bello, the first Premier of the Northern Nigeria, in which he effectively achieved some obvious developmental strides in the region with a relatively small income (for instance, the last annual budget by the late Sardauna for the whole North was just 44million pounds). "Some of these developments included the building of Ahmadu Bello University, Ahmadu Bello Stadium, the NNDC, textile factories, good roads, marketing boards, good hospitals among others" (Nuhu 2012). These crop of Northern governors apart from a few, have ruefully achieved nothing both with the Federal Revenues and their internally generated revenues. Yet, these governors have not stopped lamenting over what they called poor federal revenue allocation and the imaginary "conspiracies to 'marginalize' and 'destroy' the North" (Usman 2012). "These 19 states and over four hundred local government areas got a total of N8.3trillion from the federation account between 1999 and 2010". This does not take into consideration each state's annual budget which of course "is more than the budget of the entire Northern region of the late Ahmadu Bello era. Then, the question is; where has all this money gone into? These leaders prefer spending huge amount of money on religious events like Islamic pilgrimage, Ramadan feasts, etc which on each occasion gulps billions of Naira from these leaders. For instance, on one occasion, a sum of N2.7bn (\$17m) was reportedly expended on a year's Ramadan gifts (Usman 2012). Murtala (2007) also observed that in 2004 Kano state annual budget, a sum of N797million was budgeted for Hajj sponsorship and subsidy grant. According to him "this is more than the combined budget of the scholarship board, the state University, board of the disabled, small and medium scale enterprise promotion and so on". Indeed, this is disheartening. As if this is

not enough, the northern local government areas do not even repair township drainages or maintain existing markets and motor parks. Hence, all the undisclosed internally generated revenues and subventions are embezzled and shared amongst corrupt officials. Even some of the Monarchs and traditional elders have regrettably lost their bearing, as crave for political favour has dominated their routine operations. Still, the poor majority are left in a directionless life of misery, poverty and ignorance.

The Politics of Religion and the Almajiri Phenomenon in the North

Notwithstanding all these mal-administration and gross neglect of the Northern region by the Northern elites over the years, there has been little or no resistance from the poor majority. While this is partly because very few are adequately enlightened on their rights; it is largely because of the politics the Northern elites play with religion in the region.

Historically, during the era of colonial masters, modern western education arrived relatively late in the Northern region. However, as far back as that period, there was a form of education already in existence in the region before the introduction of Western education. This was Islamic or Quranic education and “it has been estimated that there were already 25,000 Quranic schools in the Northern region before the coming of Western education” (Crampton 1975:98). Consequently, the penetration of modern western education, which was largely pioneered by the missionaries, into the North was a great challenge.

This challenge arose from the stiff resistance the mission schools faced from the Northern native authority. However, the first school in the North was gradually introduced by Miller in collaboration with the colonial government in Zaria (Graham 1966). After so many years, a gradual establishment of more schools began to be noticed in the region. This was against the wishes of the Muslim native authorities. Hence, just a handful of Muslims attended these schools on the basis that they were not mission-driven but government owned. Therefore, while the Southern part of Nigeria embraced and waxed stronger in modern education, the Northern native authorities restricted their subjects to Quranic education which came to be popularly known as Almajiri system of education.

This brief historical background explains why the Northern part of Nigeria is educationally backward till date. Their religion has really been a barrier to the acquisition of Western education, as they have religiously held unto Quranic or Islamic Education.

Indeed, this is where the problem lies. The Almajiri Islamic education, unlike the ones obtainable in some Islamic countries that comprises different disciplines, emphasizes Islamic theology and teachings which are unconnected with a non-Muslim world. The pupils are taught with Arabic language and graduated with almost no knowledge of social, physical sciences and other branches of knowledge (faithforum.worldpress.com). These students are taught the principles of Islam which revolves around the submission to the will of Allah (God) and in extension, a submission to Islamic authorities. This is simply because the authorities in Islam are highly unquestionable; and in most cases religious leaders are occupants of political offices. Hence to be a Muslim, is to be submissive to Allah, and instituted authorities. This is what Crampton (1975:105) observed that made him assert that “in the Muslim Emirates, religious instruction was a strong social ties that controlled behavior”. Likewise, Adedokun (2013) writes that “in the north, religious monarchial and patriarchal

authorities are almost incontestable”. And there is no doubt that this largely contributed in making the pre-colonial Northern Emirates easily governable by the Emirs. Indeed, the Islamic religion has been instrumental in achieving social order, and cohesion and obedience.

The above premise explains why some Northern Nigerian leaders could do or take any decision without being questioned. This is because their subjects are almost entirely ignorant of the responsibilities of their leaders, and of course, human rights are never taught in Quranic schools in the first place, and yet, not all could even attend these schools. Although some of these early Northern leaders like Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sarkin Sokoto and first Premier of Northern region cannot be out rightly associated with corruption, they cannot at the same time be completely exonerated. For instance, according to the speech Major Nzeogwu made to justify the takeover of power on January 15, 1966, after the killing of Sir Ahmadu Bello and the rest, “the military took over because the first republican politicians were collecting ten percent bribes” (Nuhu 2012). This is not to discredit these leaders of their developmental strides, especially the ones brought into the Northern region by the late Sir Ahmadu Bello; but if what Major Nzeogwu said is to be taken to be true, it means that these leaders always took 10% for themselves and invest 90% in developmental project which according to Nuhu Ribadu is comparatively fair.

This is unlike the current crop of Northern leaders who seem to be appropriating the entire treasury to themselves, without any attention to the development of the region. They seem to cash in on the ignorant religious majority in the region who seem not to know their left from their right. These corrupt leaders encourage or abandon this majority to Islamic education, knowing fully the benefits of Western modern education. Hence, Brennan (2012) rhetorically asked;

List careers in Nigeria where the knowledge of Koran is applicable or most sought? What job can you get with your Koranic qualification? Why are the elite northerners deceiving their shallow brothers, allowing them to trail this path of futile returns?

This is what has given rise to the problem of Almajiri children in the North. These children, which Prof. Idris Abdulqadir called “bowl carrying children” (www.gamji.com) who are mostly male, are sent out in large numbers, by their respective poor parents to acquire Islamic education under Mallams. At these Quranic schools, they are foisted into begging and menial jobs for their up keep and that of the mallams. According to Fada (2005), these “male children are sent to acquire Islamic education at the tender ages of between four and nine years”. This practice can be dated back to the 11th century, and unlike several centuries back when the Islamic authorities and host communities of these children funded their welfare; today, they are completely abandoned to fend for themselves and the Mallams, which they try to do through the street begging. Yet, their numbers have kept on increasing as parents have not stopped sending their children to this Almajiri schools. According to the National Council for the Welfare of Destitute (NCWD), the current population of Almajiri is about 7 million (www.gamji.com). No wonder, they are littered all over the North with their begging bowls. Prof. Idris Abdulqadir observed that “these bowl-carrying children have now become so ubiquitous in almost all nooks and corners of the Northern states, such that we

would almost be made to believe that, that is where Almighty Allah (SWT) wants them to be". Hence Hassan (2013) said, "this Islamic Almajiri education system as it is presently being practiced, has indeed outlived its usefulness" in the North. According to him;

As the system is currently being practiced today, lots of the children never make it. Some are lost through violence in the streets, some through child stealing, while others are lost through diseases and hunger. Those who make it usually complete the reading of the Holy Qur'an and eventually became traders, drivers and so on. Those who could not make it are condemned to menial jobs, since they have no skills at hand. They resort to wheel barrow pushing, touting and so on. They remain as untrained armies available to anybody poised to ferment trouble.

Despite these obvious facts of socio-economic dehumanization in the North, the leaders and elites of North extraction have over the years claimed deaf ears and blind eyes. This is because the situation provides an opportunity for unchallenged embezzlement and misappropriation of funds and revenues. They have purposefully allowed the Almajiri phenomenon to continue thriving in the North for their personal dishonest economic interest. Prof. Idris has rightly observed that;

There seems to be a conspiracy of silence between the parents, authorities and the society at large. For the parents, the Almajiri system provides an outlet and drainage for the excess children at home; for the authorities, it is a relief that they do not have to budget for about 7million children's education and welfare. As for the elites, they are careless as long as their own children are not involved (www.gamji.com).

The situation becomes worse with the fact that after the religious indoctrination at these Quranic schools, these children grow into their youthful age and beyond, in docility, ignorance, subservience and helplessly unable to challenge some of these corrupt leaders who have on countless occasions embezzled the funds that should have been channeled to the development of the region. Hence, illiteracy, diseases and death, abject poverty and hopelessness have ruefully become the lot of the North. However, in the preferable words of Abubakar (2013);

With the growing awareness of the populace in the act of governance, it might sooner than later dawn on these leaders that the average Northerner is getting enlightened by the day and his former ignorance which has always been the tool the leaders have been utilizing will no longer be there and he will soon be demanding for his rights like his counterparts are doing elsewhere.

Recommendations

To squarely tackle the problem of corruption and the northern underdevelopment, the following should be done:

- (i) The Quranic system of education should be scrapped entirely or restructured to include modern Western education system. While, the building of 400

Almajiri schools by President Goodluck Jonathan is duly commended, the Federal Government should also watch closely to determine that the school Curricula reflect the ones used in schools in other regions. Also, the teaching of vocational skills should not be left out in the school curricula.

- (ii) Adult education should be vigorously pursued in the Northern region. This should be targeted at the adult illiterate population who had no opportunity to acquire modern education.
- (iii) Series of enlightenment programs should be organized for the ignorant majority in the region. This should help educate them on their rights as citizens and the responsibilities of government. The idea is that, it is only when these citizens know their rights and the obligations of government that they can demand of them from their leaders. And until they start demanding their rights and entitlements from these leaders, the problem of corruption and outright embezzlement will continue.
- (iv) The attention of the Anti-graft Agencies (EFCC and ICPC) should be drawn to some of these northern governors. Some of them deserved to be probed and prosecuted if found guilty.
- (v) Finally, all the corrupt northern governors and other elites of northern extraction should have a change of mind and rise to their responsibilities. They should strategize practical ways of improving the lot of the north. They should look inward and harness the economic opportunities that abound in the region, instead of the endless complaint about what they called poor Federal government revenue allocation. There are mineral resources like tin and columbite in Plateau state, lead in Zamfara state, limestone in Sokoto and so on, which should be commercialized to boost their internally generated revenue. Agriculture should also be resuscitated in the region as it has been in decades ago before the discovery of crude oil in the country.

Conclusion

This paper, so far, has succeeded in bringing to light what seems to be the major cause of the prolonged underdevelopment of northern part of Nigeria. This is the docile, unresisting and subservient nature of the majority of the northern natives. Yet, these people cannot be blamed as they have over the years been under the darkness of ignorance caused by their choice less attachment to Islamic system of education. Indeed, religion seems to have been used as a tool of corruption and exploitation by successive northern leaders and elites. But, then if the above recommendations will be implemented, by the next five to ten years, the problem of northern underdevelopment will be a thing of the past.

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