

Religious Situation In Nigeria: A Case Of Christian Persecution Not Religious Conflict: A Review

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Abstract

This paper argues that Christians in Nigeria are being persecuted by their Muslim neighbours and compatriots. Their latest offensive is carried out by a fundamentalist Islamic group known as Boko-Haram whose declared fundamental objective is to Islamize Nigeria. The Paper attempts to show how religious freedom has become a casualty in a situation where genuine persecution becomes misconstrued in some quarters as religious conflict. The paper also tries to document their latest attacks and calls for both a sociological and strategic response to their offensive. This paper, it should be noted is the product of my conversation with some Christian Church Leaders from Netherlands, Norway, Sweden the UK and the US, during the last World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly in Busan South Korea, who engaged me in a conversation on the religious situation in Nigeria. According to them, their print media reports the religious situation in Nigeria as a situation of religious conflict. It took me time to explain to them that the religious situation in Nigeria is that of persecution of Christians by the Muslims. A Nigerian friend, who shared the same views with me, referred me to his works and other related relevant journal materials on the subject of religious freedom and religious persecution. I have quoted them freely to drive home my views on religious persecution to my western colleagues.

CITATIONS

- **Howard Jeter – US Ambassador to Nigeria 2003:**
If the terrorism scare was an issue in 2001, it has not been less so ever since, especially since the second half of 2003. For example, when Howard Jeter, the US ambassador to Nigeria, was asked at the end of his

tenure, June 2003, to comment on a report that Nigeria could be under threat from terrorist cells, Ambassador Jeter replied:

“... I think that terrorism is such a faceless clandestine enemy of people. It is very unconventional; it is not like one army facing another army that you can see and know what people are trying to achieve. It is clandestine. It can happen anywhere. It has happened to the U.S., it has happened to Indonesia, it has happened to the U.K, it has happened to France, it could happen to Nigeria. So, it is in the interest of those countries who want to see order and peace on the international arena to become a part of this global effort to try to do something about terrorism ... So Nigeria is not immune. There has been some indication that **al Qaeda** has said that Nigeria is one of those that they feel is too close to the United States. So, it is guilty by association. So that means that effectively Nigeria is being looked at by some of these terrorists cells as some kind of enemy. So, what that means is that we are very vigilant in this country in protecting our people, officials and non-officials and I think that it is something that you simply can't brush off.” (*Interviewed by S. Onayoade, “My Worst Experience was the Ikeja Explosions that looked like Sept. 11” in Punch, 14 June 2003, p.4-5*)

▪ **MUAMAR GHADDAFI – FORMER LIBYAN LEADER:**

Ghaddafi was addressing an International Sufism Conference held in Misratah, east of Tripoli on Saturday, September 23, 1995. He took the opportunity to call for the division of Nigeria into two states on religious lines ... But more pertinent is the fact that Ghaddafi's unsolicited “advice” is an indication of external interest in the incessant religious riots in Nigeria and what this interest portends. (Agi: Political History of Religious Violence in Nigeria, 1988, P 197).

▪ **PETER CLARK:**

We are witnessing the resurgence of the old militant Islam in a new guise determined to finish the work began by the jihadist ... of the early 19th century by dipping the Quran in the Atlantic Ocean (Agi P165).

- **CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA (CAN):**
The failure, neglect and refusal of government to stop the continued assault and brutalization of Christian lives and property in the country is deliberate and part of a well-designed scheme of systematic elimination of Christians and Christianity (Agi P166).

- **3. NORTHERN CHRISTIANS ELDERS FORUM (NCEF):**
Muslims attack on Christians have persisted because the authorities who are the principal custodians of our Constitution have only been paying lip service to our constitutionally entrenched values of freedom of worship, protection of lives and property and equality under the law in respect to Northern Christians.

...Our commitment to peaceful co-existence and religious tolerance has been perceived as fear and our doctrine of turning the other cheek as cowardice. Now we have run out of checks. It will be asking too much to expect us to continue to stand idly by while we are being blatantly and arrogantly massacred and our property wantonly destroyed by fellow Nigerians.

The NCEF want the government to assure them that they are not second class citizens in their own country, who can be eliminated at will without repercussion “where justice and protection is continuously and deliberately denied us then taking them becomes a legally and morally acceptable option (Agi, P168).

- **LETHAL PERSECUTION:**
...The March 7, 2010 massacre in Jos; The April 16, 2011 Sharia states pogrom and the January 20, 2012

Kano onslaught mark three consecutive years of triple-delight casualties, each in excess of 200 lives lost from a single incident. These incidents only scratch the surface of persecution in a country that has the world's largest population of Christians and Muslims living together setting a stage for unfathomable conflict (Ann Buwalda & Emmanuel Ogebe on Beyond Boko-Haram: The Lethal Persecution of Nigeria's Christians – Morning Star News).

▪ **MUSLIM LEADERS AMBIVALENCE:**

The emergence of these fundamentalists have created a delimma for the mainstream Muslims who have reacted with ambivalence – they dare not support, or oppose – lest they be accused of either aiding anarchy or quarreling with those who fight on behalf of Prophet Mohammed. (Agi: Political Political History of Religious Violence in Nigeria, 1988, P177).

▪ **FEMI –KAYODE – (LET NOT THE MAN DIE IN US):**

Eagles do not hide when they see a storm gathering, lions do not retreat when the enemy threatens and kings do not run when they hear the sound of battle. Rather the eagle flies boldly into the eye of the storm without a trace of fear but with power, majesty, grace and passion. The lion rises and roars with courage and strength as his adversary approaches. The king does not yield one inch of the field to the marauding enemy but rather he gallantly and boldly leads his captains and princes into the most bitter part of the battle. This surely is our calling and the essence of our lives. The Lord has given us the spirit of the eagle and the lion: the spirit of the warrior and the king. We cannot and will not be intimidated by anything, any circumstance or anyone and least of all by what we see, feel or hear.

We must therefore humble ourselves before God and know that He alone rules in the affairs of men and determines the destiny of nations. We must fear God alone and we must strive to be the man (or woman) that He has called us to be – a prince of Heaven, a deliverer

of his people, a fearless warrior and a worthy king. One of the characteristics of such a leader and king is the courage and ability to fearlessly rise up to the occasion and speak out when faced with evil, injustice and oppression. This can hardly be disputed. (SUN Sunday Dec. 1, 2013).

1. INTRODUCTION

The state of Muslim persecution of Christians in Nigeria has passed the alarming stage and has now entered into its fatal stage. The problem here is the threat to Nigerian Christians' right to religious freedom which is guaranteed in section 38 of the Nigerian Constitution which echoes article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 8 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights. Furthermore, Article 15 (2), of the Constitution states that, "... discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, Religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited." It goes on to echo Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by stating that:

- (1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
- (2) No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or religion not approved by his parent or guardian.
- (3) No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

The Constitution upholds the fundamental right of people to believe or not to believe. It forbids anyone from suffering on account of his or her religion or faith. The right to manifest what one believes or to practise

one's religion is also provided for in the law of the land. Notwithstanding this legal framework, Nigeria's record of upholding religious freedom is wretched.

In spite of these provisions which ensure the secularity of the State, as it obtains in other democracies that are multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural like the US, UK, India etc, yet the Muslim leadership in Nigeria flout these constitutional provisions with impunity and demand the implementation of the Islamic legal code. They contend that the adoption of Sharia does not amount to adopting a state religion.* This fact constitutes both the remote and immediate causes of Muslim persecution of Christians, especially in Northern Nigeria.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO RELIGIOUS CRISIS IN NIGERIA

Post-independence Crises (1960-1966)

Religious crises in Nigeria both in the pre-independence period and between 1960 and 1966, were for the most part, at the level of a cold war, characterized by external mutual respect between Muslims and Christians.

The mutual respect stemmed from the fact that none of the religions really knew the strength of the other. Thus the mutual tolerance was merely out of fear of the other and not any genuine respect. Each one respected the other from a distance and never dared to overstep its bounds.

In 1961, the late Sardauna of Sokoto formed the Jamaatu Nasril Islam (JNI), an Islamic movement charged with the special responsibility of propagating Islam. It was thought by some people to be the religious wing of the political party the NPC. However, some of the activities of the JNI were not acceptable to other Muslims, especially those who did not belong to the Northern People's Congress (NPC).

Religious Crises after the Civil War (1970-1975)

The first five years after the civil war were declared the period of reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. Despite the attempted reconciliation, the religious face of the civil war persisted even after the war had ended. It continued in the form of a religious cold war.

The Sharia Crisis (1976 -1979)

The Sharia issue is as old as Islam itself in Nigeria. It was the aim of Usman dan Fodio to implement it in the northern emirates in order to reform what was perceived as the lax practice of Islam among the rulers. Matthew Kukah made reference to this point that: "the jihad of Usman dan Fodio was the establishment of an Islamic State based on the Sharia" (Kukah: *Religion, Politics and Power ...p115*).

While the Northern Constituent Assembly was debating the issue, Muslims outside sought to enforce their argument by engaging in threats and riots to support the idea that if the Sharia was not accepted they were going to make the country ungovernable. The Muslim Students Society (MSS) for example demonstrated at Ahmadu Bello University, pleading with the Assembly men to "stop opposition to Sharia or take full responsibility for putting the entire nation in chaos". In April 1979, protesters took to the streets in Zaria and Kaduna with such banners as: No Sharia, No Peace, No Sharia, No Constitution, No Sharia, No Muslim, No Muslims, No Nigeria, etc ... (see Sylvanus Udoidem, *"Religion in the Political Life of Nigeria"*, in F. U. Okafor Ed. p162).

From what has been said so far about the Sharia issue, two conclusions could be reached namely:

- (1) That the Sharia debate has both religious and political implications. On the religious front, it seeks for the establishment of an Islamic state, where an ideal Islamic religion could be practiced. On political front, the defenders and the opposers use the debate to gain a political following either as the defenders of Islam or the protectors of Islam from Christian domination.
- (2) That the Sharia issue is major source of conflict in the Nigerian body polity, is incontestable. It was this Sharia debate that set the stage for the prevalent religio-political conditions that existed at the time that Alhaji Shehu Shagari became the president during the Second Republic (1979 - 1983)

The Shagari Regime Religious Crises (1979 -1983)

Although the Sharia provisions were not included in the 1979 Constitution in exactly the same way the Muslims demanded, they at least saw the election and swearing-in of President Shehu Shagari as

Allah's will for Nigeria. With Shagari, a Sokoto prince and a Muslim, Muslims felt that the stage was set for the achievement of the will of Allah: effective Islamization of the country.

Kano Riot (18-29 December 1980)

The December 1980 Kano Riot, because of its bloody nature and level of destruction, has come to be referred to as the first religious and bloody riot in contemporary Nigeria. However, according to the report of the Tribunal of Enquiry set up after the 1980 riot, however, prior to the Kano outbreak, there had been over thirty violent incidents of religious riots in the northern states. But these were nothing compared to the December 1980 event.

Burning of Churches in Kano (October 1982)

The burning of Christian churches in October 1982 is an example of an inter-religious crisis in Nigeria. This was the first open and violent religious conflict between Christians and Muslims. The action of the Muslims was probably fuelled by the laying of the foundation for a Christian Church near a mosque in Kano. As noted by Matthew Kukah, "although there was no evidence of hostility visibly shown by the visit of the Archbishop to Kano, it was not accidental that the site where he laid the foundation stone for the building of the new Church became the scene of the violence that erupted in Kano six months after the visit. The violence was targeted at Christ Church in Fagge, Kano Metropolis" (Kukah p 157).

The Buhari Regime Religious Crises (1983 -1985)'

The Buhari regime which overthrew the Shagari-led civilian administration did not do much to allay the fears of non-Muslims, especially given the peculiar nature of the composition of his government and their policies. Most of the members of the Supreme Military Council were either northern Muslims or Muslims from the south. This structure made Christians very uncomfortable. It was not only Christians that the regime offended. If anything the Buhari regime incurred the anger of almost all groups in the country. For example, by drastically reducing the number of intending pilgrims across religious lines, Buhari made himself unpopular even among Muslims. The religious riots that occurred during this period were for the most part political in nature.

The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) Crisis (January 1986)

During the Babangida regime, information filtered out to the public that Nigeria had sought admission into the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). This raised a lot of anxiety among Christians who now believed that the federal government was systematically engaged in the process of Islamizing the country.

A bitter controversy erupted between Christians and Muslims. The Christians based their argument on the provisions of the Nigerian Constitution, which upholds the secular state of the nation. They argued that since Nigeria is a secular state it could not and should not belong to such an organization. All Christians were unanimous in asking for the withdrawal of the country from membership of such an organization.

The Muslims, on their part, argued that just as it is accepted for Nigeria to maintain diplomatic relations with the Vatican, there was nothing wrong in it being a member of an organization that was essentially a cultural body with many economic advantages for the country.

Ahmadu Bello University Religious Crises (June 1988)

In June 1988, during the Student's Union elections in Ahmadu Bello University, violence erupted when it turned out that a Christian candidate would win the elections. Prior to the elections, one of the campaign slogans popularly used by the Christian candidate, one Mr. Stephen was 'A vote for Steve is a vote for Christ'. The implication of such a slogan was that the campaign for votes in the Student Union elections was being done on the basis of religion.

In January 1990, Christians in four northern towns protested against the marginalization of Christians in the country. Protesters carried placards with inscriptions such as: "We reject OIC", "Islamization of the country is totally rejected." "We are ready to buy our rights with our bloods". Christians were now determined either to fight for their rights or defend themselves whenever they were abused or attacked. Such preparedness was acted out in what came to be known as the Bauchi Riot.

Kano Riot (11 October 1991)

The Kano religious riot, 1991, was a case of an inter-religious conflict. A group of Muslim youths attacked people in Sabongari and the Fagge area

of the metropolis. The attack was a protest against the religious crusade organized by the State Chapter of CAN with a German Christian preacher, Reinhard Bonke, in attendance.

What offended the Muslim youths most was what they saw as an anti-Muslim policy in the state. Earlier in the year, they had asked for permission to invite a Muslim fundamentalist preacher to Kano but the government refused. When therefore permission was granted to Christians to invite the preacher from Germany, they interpreted it as an anti-Muslim policy.

Obasanjo Regime 1999-2004

In January 2000, the Governor of Zamfara State Ahmed Yerima introduced the Sharia legal system in his state. Since then, several Northern States have followed suit. This has led to several riots and destruction of lives and property both in the North and in other parts of the country.

(See E.M. Uka, **Ethnic, Religious and Communal Conflicts in Nigeria: Implications for Security**, in *Security, Social Services and Sustainable Development in Nigeria* ed Chidi Ikonne, University of Port Harcourt 2005 Pp. 115-127.)

The Presidential Election – with Goodluck Jonathan on the Lead ...

As the early results of the presidential election showed that Goodluck Jonathan a Christian was leading, Islamists went on the rampage attacking churches, Christians and Muslims they perceived to have supported him. In Kaduna State, tension grew when the Muslim Governor was elevated to the Vice-Presidency of the country after the death of President Umaru Musa Yar'adua in 2010, and the then Christian Deputy Governor constitutionally became the Governor. Even though the Muslim Governor was appointed as the Vice-President of Nigeria, Islamists didn't want a Christian to become the governor in Kaduna State. Against their wish he became the Governor and went ahead later to win a term through a highly polarised election in 2011. Later he died in a helicopter crash to the open jubilation of the youths who rejoiced that power has returned to a Muslim.

3. SOME REFERENCES TO CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION BY ISLAMIST FUNDAMENTALISTS IN NIGERIA:

Vanguard 31 May, 2013. Nigeria: Boko-Haram Still Killing Christians – CAN - The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) raised alarm over the continuous killings of Christians and burning of Churches by the deadly Islamic sect, Boko –Haram, in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe States.

The President of CAN, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor’s statement read in part ...”Last Friday, for instance, an executive member of CAN in Gwoza Local Council, Rev. Luka Bazigila and a member of the COCIN Church, Yohanna, both of who were in attendance at a Christian fellowship were shot dead by gunmen who alighted from a tricycle. The gunmen, apparently angry that they missed their target, the Medical Director of Borno State Hospital, who was out when they arrived his residence, shot and killed his step mother.”

“A Muslim guard, employed by a Christian Architect in Abuja to watch over his house was mistaken for a Christian and shot dead. One COCIN Church on the Mandara Mountain was burnt by members of the Boko-Haram sect on a Sunday morning”

On February 26, 2012, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed six Christians during an attack at a Church in Jos, Plateau State.

On March 11, 2012, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed three civilians in a bombing outside of a Church in Jos. The suicide bomber was stopped before he could enter the premises of the Church.

On April 8, 2013, Boko Haram killed 36 people and wounded dozens more in several bombings outside of a Church in Kaduna on Easter day.

On June 3, 2012, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed 15 people in an attack on a church in Bauchi.

On September 23, 2012, a suicide bomber killed a woman and a child in an attack at a Catholic Church in Bauchi.

On October 28, 2012, a Boko Haram suicide bomber drove an explosives-packed Jeep into a Catholic Church in Kaduna, killing at least eight people and wounding over 100.

On November 25, 2012, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed 30 persons in an attack at St. Andrew’s Protestant Church, located in the Armed Forces Command and Staff College, Kaduna.

On December 1, 2012, four Churches were attacked throughout Borno State, including arson attacks on the EYN Church, COCIN Church and Deeper Life Church. A Church security guard was killed.

On December 24, 2012, gunmen suspected to be Boko Haram elements attacked a COCIN Church during Church service before setting it on fire. This attack happened in Potiskum, Yobe State. Five persons, including the Pastor were killed.

On January 2, 2012, Boko Haram called on all Christians and southerners (because they are presumed to be Christians) to leave Northern Nigeria within three days or face death. In the week following this declaration, more than 30 Christians were shot dead. Boko Haram continues to target and kill individuals Christians and southerners.

On August 7, 2012, Pastor Ali Samur was shot and killed in Maiduguri, Bornu State.

On November 18, 2012, a retired COCIN Church Pastor Reverend Elisha Kabura was killed while he and his family were preparing to go to Church in Maiduguri, Bornu State.

On November 25, 2012, a Christian couple and their son were shot dead on their way to Church in Kano, Kano State.

On December 1, 2012, Christians throats were slit and their houses burnt during a series of Boko Haram attacks on four Churches. This happened in Bornu State.

On December 28, 2012, fifteen Christians were killed in their sleep in Musari, Bornu State.

On May 14, 2013, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) secretary in Bornu State, Reverend Faye Pama Musa was murdered in Maiduguri, Bornu State.

On June 10, 2013, Reverend Jacob Kwizer of the COCIN Church was killed in Gwoza, Borno State.

On July 30, 2013, four bombs exploded in the Christian area of Sabongari where at least 45 persons were killed and two Churches (Christ Salvation Pentecostal Church and St. Stephen's Anglican Church) damaged in kano, Kano State.

On September 25, 2013, suspected Boko Haram gunmen opened fire on a Church in Dorowa in Nigerian north eastern state of Yobe, killing the pastor and his two children before setting fire to the building and fleeing.

On November 2, 2013, members of Boko Haram sect ambushed and killed wedding guests numbering 30 people along the Bama-Mubi-Banki

Road in Borno State. The United Nations Human Rights Office condemned the attack.

...300 people have been displaced after a pre-dawn deadly Boko Haram attack in Maiduguri, the Borno State Capital. The homes of the victims were destroyed in the attack. The sect has claimed responsibility for several attacks in which more than 1, 500 people, including women and children had been killed since 2009 when it launched violent attacks in northern Nigeria. (The NATION Thursday Dec., 5, 2013. P7).

In recent times the group has resorted to bombing and shooting people in Churches. For example, on a Christmas day, 25th December, 2011, St. Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla was bombed, 44 people were killed, 127 injured, and 7 went blind. On the same day, some churches in Jos and Potiskum were also targeted.

Another tragedy of the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency is the internal displacement of many indigenous Christians of Yobe State in north-eastern Nigeria. On 4 November 2012, Boko Haram stormed the Yobe State capital, Damaturu and attacked security posts and then went to the predominantly Christian settlement of the city, bombed churches, shot people, and destroyed Christian shops. Any person that could not recite the Muslim creed was killed. A majority of the over 150 people killed that day were Christians.

In the following weeks the attacks against churches and Christians intensified and spread to other towns like Potiskum and Geidam, forcing many Christians, including those that are indigenes to flee to other states, and those who were not able to leave took refuge in two Christian enclaves, Gadaka and Kukar Gadu.

These are few citations on the horrific nature of how Christians are persecuted through the instrumentality of the Islamic fundamentalists group called Boko – Haram. These acts of brutality and cold blooded murder cannot be described as social conflict since the victims carried no weapons and were not out to attack anyone.

The fact that the sect has continued to unleash murderous attacks in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States shows that the state of emergency is not working as it should ... The military high command must set up high-powered probe of this incident ... As things stand, we enjoin the federal government to obtain help from all available sources to win this war. It should not pretend or delude itself that it can effectively prosecute

the war against terror alone. The evidence on ground points out the need for government to seek assistance of security experts to contain the insurgents. (*The Attack on Military Facilities in Maiduguri SUNDAY SUN – EDITORIAL, Dec. 8, 2013 P.9*).

4. TYPOLOGIES OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN NIGERIA:

a. Defining Religious Persecution

Like many concepts, the word ‘persecution’ is definitional. The etymological origin of the word ‘persecution’ is the Latin expression *persequi*, meaning “to pursue”. Put simply, religious persecution refers to any unjust action of any form and the level of hostility directed at individuals or groups regarded as the *religious other*, essentially for faith related reasons, resulting in any kind or level of harm to the victims. So what distinguishes religious persecution is the primacy of religion as the leading factor for the persecution. Persecution may cause the victim psychological, social and/or physical harm. The psychological and social impacts of persecution, although less visible, are too grave to be ignored.

b. Types of Persecution in Nigeria:

With the above definition of persecution in focus, we can now attempt to characterise the typologies of persecution experienced by Christians in Nigeria. As there is no rule of thumb for such taxonomy, a simple approach is proposed. First, Insidious persecution and Elevated persecution.

Insidious Persecution

The persecution that Christians in northern Nigeria experience is *insidious persecution*. This category is endemic in northern Nigeria and typified by the daily experiences of many Christian minorities in the region. Some examples of these include: discrimination in employment; stagnation in promotion in public service; suppression of ministries; denial of church building permits; preventing Christian children in public schools from receiving Christian religious studies (while Muslim counterparts receive Islamic religious studies); denying Christians the opportunity to reach elective and appointive positions; imposing the veil on Christian female students; denying Christian students a place of

worship on campuses (whereas mosques can be built anywhere); discrimination in admission to tertiary institutions; forcing young Christian girls into marriage against their parents' wishes (while forbidding Christian boys from having relationships with Muslims girls); and the maltreatment and threatening of converts to Christianity. Such discrimination is common in most of the *Sharia* states and has become normal for Christians in northern Nigeria. These common practices of persecution accentuate the domination-subordination relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in northern Nigeria. In a nutshell, *insidious persecution* undermines a person's dignity, development and religious liberty; it may also involve physical harm to the victim(s). (Yakubu Joseph & Rainer Ruthfuss)

Elevated Persecution.

The second category of persecution that Christians in northern Nigeria are subjected to is *elevated persecution*. This form of persecution used to be intermittent, but in recent years has become more entrenched and is evolving. *Elevated persecution* is a more lethal form of persecution. It is employed by extremists against Christians in northern Nigeria. Unsatisfied with the impact of *insidious persecution*, Islamists started to adopt more vicious strategies against Christians living in the region. At first, this took the form of sporadic violence involving attacks against Christians, their places of worship and homes. Some examples of these include: the 18 February 2006 violence against Christians by Muslim groups in Maiduguri in reaction to cartoons of Prophet Mohammed published in a Danish newspaper in 2005; attacks against Christians following a newspaper editorial by a journalist about Muslims protesting against Nigeria's hosting of the Miss World Beauty Pageant in 2002, which Muslim clerics considered blasphemous and resulted in a recurrent attacks on Christians and their businesses by Muslim youths who have been indoctrinated with the superstitious belief that the 'sinfulness' of non-Muslims is responsible for lunar or solar eclipses, and attacks against Christians in Kano in reaction to America's launching of war in Afghanistan. (Yakubu & Rainer)

Nigerian Christians are subjected to such episodic violence at the slightest rumour of 'blasphemy' or 'provocation', whether 'committed' in Nigeria or abroad. After such attacks occur the usual reaction from state authorities and Muslim religious leaders is to dismiss the action as

the “activities of hoodlums and miscreants”. The government generally promises an investigation into the incident and that it will bring the culprits to justice. That is however usually the last thing to be heard about it. When the next incident occurs, the same pattern of response is repeated. The impunity enjoyed by those who perpetrate such violence has become an incentive for this kind of persecution. Muslim religious leaders in the north have failed to come out bravely to condemn the violence in the strongest terms, and to call the section of their community that engages in such atrocious behaviour to order. They have also failed to challenge or educate their clerics and followers about the distortions that lead them to violent outbursts against Christians. Even mainstream Muslims react with ambivalence – they dare not support or oppose – lest they be accused of either aiding anarchy or quarrelling with those who fight on behalf of Prophet Mohammed.

In the last few years, *elevated persecution* has assumed a more lethal form. As Boko Haram (meaning Western education is a sacrilege) –is seeking to establish a strict version of *Sharia* and to create an Islamic state in northern Nigeria. For this reason, they have engaged in terrorist attacks against Christians, Churches and other non-Muslims from other traditions.

In the last three or four years another pattern of *elevated persecution* has been witnessed in the area. This has taken the form of invasions of isolated, geographically dispersed Christian villages by armed assailants. Initially considered to be attacks by armed Fulani herdsmen, these assaults have become increasingly widespread and highly organised. Armed attackers take victims by surprise, usually arriving late at night or before dawn. For example, in a series of coordinated attacks on three Christian communities in Barkin Ladi and Riyom Local Government Areas of Plateau State, 100 people, including women and children, were killed in July 2012. Boko Haram subsequently claimed responsibility for the attacks and made its intention clear:

The sect “thanked God for the success of the attacks” and vowed that there was no going back on the jihad (Holy War) it had launched against Christians and the government. It also asked “Christians in Nigeria to accept Islam” as a condition for a ceasefire.

Many Christian villages in Kaduna, Bauchi, Plateau, Yobe, Borno and Adamawa states have experienced such attacks. Many Christians have fled from flashpoints in Borno and Yobe. Some have even abandoned their farms, shops and other personal belongings, only to hear later that these items were taken by their Muslim neighbours.

c. Civil Conflicts as a Vehicle for Persecution

Inter-communal conflicts have had a debilitating impact on Nigeria's development. The common causes of such social conflicts are: land and boundary disputes; struggles for political power; the indigene/settler divide; diminished grazing land and encroachment of pastoralists onto cultivated lands; political marginalization; discrimination and hindered opportunities; historic grievances, social discontent, ethnic chauvinism; religious extremism; weak institutions; corruption and bad governance. While each of these factors increase a society's proneness to conflict, there is nevertheless a link between conflict and persecution in which the former drives the latter. In the case of Nigeria there are structural and systemic issues that have nurtured conflicts.

The majority of the incidents of conflicts that have been reported in the international media as 'clashes' between Muslims and Christians in actual fact have been one-sided violence against Christians. For example, several of the instances of *elevated persecution* enumerated earlier may have been reported in the media as a 'clash' between Christians and Muslims. A prominent human rights activist observed this about the media:

Most northern Christians can only listen to agenda set by the Hausa services of the international media and not participate. Quite a lot of errors are peddled and this works to the disadvantage of Christians. The media often sets an agenda for conflict. Why is the international media interested in setting negative agenda? Are they actually monitored by the editorial board when they prepare their stories about conflicts? International media is stoking conflict this way. For example, a pastor, whose church has been destroyed three times in separate conflicts, said:

Even before our church was burnt people were throwing stones at our church and throwing faeces into our church. We were warned that we would have to leave the place of our worship. Our church in Kaduna was burnt three times. If this is not religious, why is the church a target? Who in our congregation has offended anyone? Even before the Boko Haram crisis, we have been a target of persecution. They don't want a church located in their neighbourhood. All of the churches in the area have been burnt.

Increasingly overt hostility to the presence of Christianity in Muslim hinterlands has manifested itself in frequent outbreaks of violence. As a consequence, there are many abandoned church-owned properties in neighbourhoods that Christians can no longer enter. The pastor quoted here mentioned that his church building has become a waste dumping ground.

Another recent example of how conflict is used to pursue a religious agenda was the post-election violence of 2011. As a Christian candidate from the southern region was announced as the winner of the presidential election, Muslim youths took to the streets across the *Sharia* states. They attacked non-Muslims, and destroyed their shops and homes. More than 350 churches were destroyed and over 800 lives lost in three days of rioting. This was simply dismissed as a spontaneous riot by analysts with insufficient knowledge of the nuances of the history of Muslim-Christian relations in Nigeria.

5. RESPONSES TO CHRISTIANS PERSECUTION

As Christians and their places of worship have become increasingly vulnerable to attacks, a number of security measures have been adopted by the churches. Security around church buildings has been intensified: Churches are acquiring handheld metal detectors to screen people; in some churches women are barred from entering with handbags; cars are parked in designated areas, and roadblocks are mounted around some

churches to restrict access. Even with such tight security, a suicide bomber forced himself into the gates of the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) headquarters' church on Sunday, 26 February 2012.

Apart from these physical security measures, the church has embarked on spiritual activities as prayer and fasting. At the level of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the main umbrella organisation of churches including Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals, days of fasting and prayers have been organised. CAN have also been providing relief materials to the victims of attacks in several places, and continues to speak in the media on behalf of Christians. The leaders of virtually all kinds of churches continue to preach peace and appeal for calm.

While the present situation has made the tense relations between Christians and Muslims even worse, initiatives aimed at promoting inter-faith dialogue have been sustained by the efforts of the leadership of both religions. The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and its state and local government equivalents, and numerous inter-faith initiatives have continued to serve as important platforms for Christians and Muslims to work together to seek ways to improve mutual understanding and tolerance. However, the inability of these efforts to make significant positive impacts at this crucial time underscores the need to evaluate the approaches to inter-faith dialogue with a view to making it more meaningful and productive.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Northern Nigeria offers a fascinating case study of the relationship between persecution and conflict. Events in the region illustrate that conflict can be used to advance the goals of persecution or to fast track them. The *insidious persecution*, with which Christians in northern Nigeria have long been familiar, appears to have been of limited efficacy. Consequently, a higher degree of persecution, *elevated persecution*, involving direct spontaneous attacks, violent confrontations and terror strikes, are increasingly being employed in the region.

Boko Haram's campaign of terror provides an appalling example of how jihadists have used the guise of insurgency to perpetrate unprecedented persecution. Many Christian rural communities are living under virtual

siege by Islamists who invade such places periodically and kill innocent people. The goal is clear. Christians are fleeing from such flashpoints and the Christian presence is reducing significantly as a result of these religious cleansings.

In the light of the above clear case of religious persecution against Christians especially in the Northern part of Nigeria and the threat of these sad developments to the corporate existence of Nigeria, and given the provocative statements like: “there will be bloodshed if Goodluck is re-elected” warns Junaid Mohammed – a Second Republic member of the House of Representative and Russian trained Medical Doctor. He declared that blood would flow on the streets of Nigeria, should President Jonathan insists on running for the presidency in 2015. (Sunday SUN Dec. 1, 2013. P63). Similar statements include:

“There will be bloodshed if Goodluck is not re-elected.” “If there is a repeat performance of the massive rigging that the North witnessed in the presidential election of 2011 anywhere in the country in 2015, Nigeria will burn.” Another key player and presidential aspirant said, “both the dog and baboon shall be soaked in blood”. According to Femi Fani-Kayode in his *Nigeria at 53: A Time to Think*, he said “These words must be taken very seriously, indeed they reflect the thinking and mindset of millions of people from both sides of the political and regional divide ... One thing that I believe is that we can at least agree on this that perhaps it is time for us to be courageous enough to begin to talk about these issues openly and debate them ... Whatever happens in 2015 and whoever wins, whether it be a northerner or Goodluck Jonathan of the South-South, I see blood on the horizon, and I see disaster approaching.”

Kayode continues “...is it not time for us to begin to accept the bitter truth that our marriage is uncomfortable and unhappy and that it may not have been made in heaven or ordained by God? Is it not time for us to have a confederation of nationalities in Nigeria and to re-structure the country drastically to give maximum autonomy to the various regions and nationalities or indeed is it not time to just break up and go our separate ways?
(The NATION, Wednesday Oct. 2, 2013).

National Conference/Dialogue

Could the stark reality of the problem posed by Fani-Kayode and others like him be addressed through the platform of committee on national conference/dialogue, that has been charged with the responsibility to resolve the issues that cause tension and friction in politics and re-enforce the ties that bind the many ethnic nationalities (250 of them) and ensure that Nigeria's immense diversity continues to be a source of strength and greatness.

The Lesson from History

A peep into the history of the tendencies of ethnic nationalities clearly shows that if unchecked, they could lead to the unintended consequences of the breakup of one time united nationalities. For example, India broke up into three: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Czechoslovakia broke up into two! Yugoslavia after President Tito, broke up into five, Soviet Union broke up into 15 separate ethnic nationalities. Even some Federations put together by the British, like the East Africa Federation has since dissolved into Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland dissolved into Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe. The Federation of Malaysia and Singapore split into Malay, Singapore and North Borneo. Only the Federation of Nigeria is still standing and the British are encouraging us to stay together as a regional power when they themselves are dissolving into three separate nationalities of England, Wales and Scotland.

These contemporary realities should compel the National Conference Committee to take their assignment seriously and without any pretences to ensure that Nigeria's immense diversity continues to be a source of strength and greatness.

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The OIC Charter:

- Article II: Section A(i): The OIC is to promote Islamic solidarity among member-state.
- Article VI: Section 5: The temporary headquarters shall be **Jeddah** until Jerusalem is liberated.
- Article VIII: All member states are presumed to be Islamic states.
- Article IV: The OIC **must be attended** by Muslim Head of State and External Affairs Minister.