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Secularism in Nigeria: An Assessment

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Abstract

Secularism is not the absence of religions in the state. Rather, it is the absence of a state sponsored religion where everyone will be made to choose a religion of their choice. People are free to follow which religious tenets they like without any fear, intimidation, victimization or favour. The central and state administrations are managed in such a way that no one is victimized because of his/her religious profession. The Nigerian 1999 constitution states in article 15(2) of chapter two that, "National Integration shall be actively encouraged, whilst discrimination on the grounds of place

of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited". But is the spirit of the constitution adhered to in terms of its secularism as expected? This and other issues are what this paper intends to investigate that constitutes as obstacles to secularism in Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation of many nationalities and sub nationalities covers an estimated area of about 373.000sq miles and is bound on the south by a dense coastal swampy reaches of the Sahara desert (Luke; 1988:1). She got her independence on 1 October, 1960, almost 100 years after the Lagos territory was ceded to the British Crown by King Dosummu (Arthur and Samuel; 1970:2). It became a sovereign state in 1963 after renouncing its dominion status. It had an estimated population of about 34 million at the time of self rule. Presently, the population is about 150 million. It is important to mention here that, Nigeria being the most populous state in Africa, out of every four Africans one is a Nigerian that is why Africa had remained the centre piece of Nigerian foreign policy (Ogoloma: 1996).

Nigeria's societal base comprises indigenous societies ranging in scale from smallest autonomous village tribe to the largest kingdoms and empires of pre-colonial Africa. Within Nigeria, there are varieties of sects ranging from the Christian and Islamic sects, to those of African traditional religions (Ogoloma; 1996:38) which had threatened the unity of the country from time to time. The consequences of these cultural and traditional diversities are too many. That is why Nigerian unity and secular ideals has been threatened by the absence of strong feelings of patriotism and national integration. In the process, the fragile nature of the country's unity was brought to the fore; exposing the nation to secretarian violence, corruption, intense local parochialism, sectionalism, tribalism, and other fissiparous tendencies. These situations ushered military coup and counter-coups in 1966 and the civil war that followed from June, 1967 to January 12, 1970. The recurrent competition for control of political power between the north and south, the fear of domination of the minority by the majority, regional greed and the porous foundations of the country, became the main causes of the many coups and the long tenure of military rule in our short history as a nation (Azaiki; 2003:32). This calls for strengthening the secular character of the country which has been weakened by these happenings. And the time is now than ever before. There should be conscious effort to arrest the declining fortunes of the country. "Right now, the southern and northern parts of

Nigeria are also separated. This is because few people in the south would go to Kano state for instance. Not many people in their right senses from the south would go to Maiduguri. Few people from the south would go to the north...that should be a cause for concern for every Nigerian that a southerner no longer feels safe to go to the north (Sunday Sun March 11, 2012:2)".

Nigerian constitution like the Turkish, Indian, and others are secular. This shows how secularism is given a great importance in the Nigerian psyche. Despite various underdemocratic features of Nigeria politics and government, presidential democracy is functioning, and with considerable vigour. Similarly, the secular state and its ideals are clearly embodied in the constitution, and it is being implemented in substantial measures. The question must be answered in terms of a dynamic state which has inherited some difficult problems and/or challenges in struggling hard to overcome them along generally sound lines.

Definition and Meaning of Secularism

According to Chaturvedi (2006:280), "secularism is the giving up of religious thought and feeling in the normal day to day interaction in the society. One may believe in one's own religion but those beliefs do not form the basis or part of social behaviour with others. Religion should remain subjective and should not turn objective". In the words of Smith, "a state which guarantees individuals and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere from, unconnected with it". (Smith: 454).

Secular states in Western Europe define secularism as, "the freedom to worship, or to hold any religious belief or philosophical and ethical reference frame of thought" secularism stands for the right to be free from religious rule and teachings, and the right to freedom from governmental imposition of religion upon the people within a state. That is, the state should be neutral on matters of belief. Conversely, secularism refers to the view that, human activities and decisions, especially the political ones, should be unbiased by religious influence.

A secular state is, therefore, "a state where citizens are not discriminated in any form or manner on the basis of their religion". The secular state views the individuals as a citizen and not as a member of a particular religious group. Religion becomes entirely irrelevant in defining the terms of

citizenship; its rights and duties are not affected by the individual religious beliefs.

Theoretical Foundation of Secularism

Secularism draws its intellectual roots from Greek and Roman philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius and Epicurus, Medieval Muslim polymaths such as Ibn Rushd, Enlightenment thinkers like Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Benedict Spinoza, John Locke, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine, and modern freethinkers, agnostics and atheists such as Bertrand Russell and Robert Ingersoll.

Moreover, in Nigeria, secularism drew its root and strength from chapter one and article 10 of the 1999 constitution which states that, "The Government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion (1999:24).

Nevertheless, the term "secularism was coined by the British writer George Holyoake in 1851. It was based on free thought despite the fact that, the idea of free thought had existed throughout history. Holyoake invented the term secularism to describe his views of promoting a social order separate from religion, without actively dismissing or criticizing religious belief. Holyoake an agnostic himself, argued that, "secularism" is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity, it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose condition and sanctions exist independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge which is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life".

Secularism: In Nigeria: An Assessment

It has been observed that, right from the beginning, the secular credentials of the nation has been put to test. Soon after the independence of the country in 1st October 1960, sectarian violence broke out in the Western region. It was here for the first time in the history of Nigeria that cross carpeting was born in the floor of the Regional House of Assembly. Members from different parties were crossing over from one party to another. It was followed by arson and criminalizing of politics. And at the national level, the cultural and traditional diversities equally manifested itself especially in the way issues were tackled in the Parliament. In the process, Nigerian secularism and unity

were threatened by these happenings. And despite the spirit of the constitution and the disparate efforts of the government at maintaining and or sustaining the unity of the country by initiating for example, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), by encouraging inter-tribal or religious marriages, making sure that the Federal Cabinet is drawn from all segments of the Federation just to mention but a few. The tranquillity that these policies brought has been threatened from time to time affecting the fabric of the Nigerian polity. It must be realized that, the sudden and apparent emergence of the Boko Haram sect at this period in the history of the country is meant to destabilize the Jonathan's Administration as well as the equilibrium the country has been brought to by the government. Nevertheless, the emergence of Boko Haram has been attributed to the political rivalry between the north and the south towards controlling the political power in the country. Poverty of the majority of the Muslim people too has been attributed to it. But how could that be explained when we realize that for most of the independence years, the northerners has been at the helm of affairs of this country if this is to be accepted. We equally have to understand that, "the sect, Boro Haram is not unleashing its terror on citizens in the north without a clear and definite demand. It has always insisted that it wants sovereignty for 12 states in the north where the Sharia legal instrument will be fully implemented and churches will no more be found in the 12 states (Tentacle; 20:2012)". The sinister role of Boko Haram outfit which ordinarily looks like a religious body thinking of Islamizing the country by introducing the Sharia Law must be arrested. But on other occasions Boko Haram has emerged as a communal organization and killing the Christians in Jos Plateau State and other parts of the Northern country. And yet in other occasions, it has emerged as a political organization immediately after the presidential election results were announced killing innocent people in Kaduna State including Corpers on national duties, maiming others including pregnant women and the children especially those from the south East and the entire southern Nigeria. Such a hydra-headed monster playing such a mixed role is very pretentious and need to be check mated at all cost. This is a sine qua non before any meaningful negotiations can take place that, will usher in peace and development in that part of the country.

"It must be mention here that, Boko Haram (which means Western education is forbidden) was founded in 2002 by an Islamic cleric called Mohammed Yusuf and supported by some politicians. It had links with Al-Queda in North West Africa. They have been involved in sectarian violence in the

country which have claimed more than 30 thousand lives according to British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News report (6th Nov. 2011). The actions of Boko Haram is therefore stifling the working of secularism in this country.

Contrary to the secular credentials of the country, the southerners working in the North are treated as outsiders and are given employment as contract staff in state ministries and parastatals. This is contrary to what is happening in the south especially in Rivers State for example where, both in the ministries or government parastatals any one given job is treated in the same way whether north or south. This is in accordance with Article 15(4) of chapter two of the 1999 Nigerian constitution which states that, *“The state shall foster a feeling of belonging and of involvement among the various peoples of the Federation to the end that loyalty to the nation shall override sectional loyalties”*. Equally, Article 17(3a) of chapter two of the constitution buttresses this stand when it says, *“all citizens without discrimination on any group whatsoever, have the opportunity for securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunity to secure suitable employment”*. In the same vein, Article 17(3c) says that, *there is equal pay for equal work without discrimination on account of sex, or any other ground whatsoever”*.

While the Federal Government is yet to overcome the impact/awareness created by the Niger Delta Youths and Militancy due to poverty and environmental degradation of the region caused by oil exploitations and explorations, retrogressive activities of religious outfits like the Boko Haram if not checked, will bring back the hand of progress in the country 50 years. If Western Education is forbidden can Nigeria be able to meet up with the development going on around the world in one field or the other. We know how Africa had remained backward due to lack of knowledge in Mathematics which had helped the western world to move forward (Nduka: 2006:223-4). Before now, we have seen how states in the North like Zamfara had formalized Islamic Law which is the mixture of the full traditional Islamic law with secular laws and values.

Added to the woes of the Federal Government is the case of electoral violence witnessed in the country immediately after the results of the presidential election results were announced. The pogrom which took place in Kaduna state need not be repeated here again. But only serves as a reminder of what happened in the north before the civil war in 1967. It is this kind of ugly environment and situation that prompted the late Ikemba-

Odumegwu Ojukwu to say that, “it was simply a choice between Biafra and enslavement. And, here’s why we choose Biafra”.

Before the Jonathan administration came into existence, two of the major agents of change were in the hands of the northerners; like the Army and National Assembly. At time, a northerner as the army chief can plan and execute a coup successfully with little ease without much obstruction from any other quarters. No wonder the many years of military rule and many of the successful coups in the country led by the northerners and Muslims. With the armoury in their control and where no Igbo military man could be promoted to a general, there is going to be no contest. While the National Assembly can change the laws with their population in both houses with little opposition if they had ventured, the consequences of these, will finally be the imposition of Sharia law on the country with minimal difficulty. Recently, the Governor of Central Bank had proposed Islamic Banking system for the country. Who knows his hidden agenda? And why must it be called Islamic Banking system?

From the on-going, we have seen that Nigerian secularism has been under stress from within right from the beginning. The colonial masters need to be blamed for their role in it as well. They contributed to this dichotomy by preventing the Christians from gaining strong hold in the north. The role of Nigerian Muslim neighbours also could be questioned if, we realize that in the late 1970s, the El-Zaky Zaky and the Maitatsine Islamic groups infiltrated into the country causing some havocs. And the role of the Boko Haram now with the help of Al-Qaeda must therefore be questioned. The organization is a Muslim sect that seeks to abolish the secular system of government and establish Sharia Law in the country. They have killed many people including foreigners. This prompted President Jonathan to say that, “Boko Haram started as a harmless group in Bornu State at a time they were used by politicians to fester their political interest, now they have grown cancerous and Nigeria being the body, they want to kill the body and nobody will allow it. Some people are exploiting it to their own advantage, but terrorist attack on any part of the nation is an attack on all of us and all Nigerians will collectively fight this terror. We will crush them (2012:6)”. Boko Haram is considered to be a major potential terrorist threat affecting Nigeria and other countries, and US officials believe it is potentially allied with Al Qaeda.

Forces That Threaten the Growth of Secularism in Nigeria

“Religion has remained a core, largely divisive part of the politics of regions and ethnicity in Nigeria. Raw appeal to the religious persuasion of candidates for public office is common. The Bible and the Koran have become part of the staple of playing the divide and conquer strategy in the geopolitics of the country of almost 150 million. It has been so even before the independence of the country in October, 1960”.

Nevertheless, the following are the forces that threaten secularism in the country.

1. Religion

Religious, ethnic and political unrest had been regular occurrence in the history of pre and post independence of Nigeria. But have recently triggered violence in Nigeria. The country’s Muslim and Christian communities have clashed over the proposed introduction of the Sharia Islamic Law. Over the past months, hundreds have died during the fighting in Kaduna, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Bornu states.

The Nigerian Constitution stipulates that we are Nigerians first and then Muslims and or Christians second. However, some fanatics from the north who are elected officials are insisting that Muslims are Muslims first and Nigerians second. By this, they are entitled to live by the Sharia Islamic Law. There is a contradiction here in the sense that, they were elected through a secular constitution that is supreme legal document of the land. And each of the officials had sworn to uphold the constitution. After their election these officials now wants the constitution to be subordinate to Sharia law. These are things that is causing problem in the country. It must be mentioned here that, Sharia Law is subordinate to the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria. There should be no circumventing of the constitution. Sharia can never be superior to the constitution and absolutely wrong to operate two sets of contradictory laws in any state.

It is not surprising therefore, that however, the dreaded Islamic sect, Boko Haram has issued an ultimatum to southerners and Christians living in the north to evacuate or be massacred. They have unleashed concerted, well coordinated and systematic attacks on Christians and their psyche. This is not the “*unity in diversity*” the founding fathers stood for.

2. Ethnicity

Ethnicity is characterized by a common relation to the other relevant ethnic groups. The division of the country in 1900 into three unequal parts ushered in an era of ethnic politics and chauvinism into the Nigerian society. Ethnicity has come to be recognized as something to conserve or recapture a political identity based upon race, etc. that is why ethnicity has become an important issue confronting the country. According to Nnoli (1978:5), “ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal factors which may be language, culture, or both”. It is this social formations that affect the performance and functioning of the leaders as they may be influenced in their actions and decisions due to their ethnic inclinations and parochial mentality. The interethnic struggle for social and economic dominance also inevitably leads to nepotism and its attendant consequences, mostly hostility in the form of interethnic violence.

3. Tribalism

Tribalism is the twin brother of ethnicity and has been the major cause of the domestic political inability in the country immediately after independence and until the early 1990s. This is noticeable in the utterances of the leaders from the three major tribes (Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo), made from time to time especially when they are not in power such as ‘The marginalization of the North and their interests or the marginalization of the Igbos and their interests’, without any damper and whimper for the feelings of the minorities from where the bulk of the Federal revenue comes from. The surprising aspects of these statements and words are that, sometimes, it comes out from former heads of state, federal ministers or other high government functionaries. This is a cause for alarm.

Tribalism has been a thorn in the flesh of the country like every other African country. It has been against development of the country and the continent as a whole. Tribalism has led to ethnic politics and the issue of marginalization. In the process, this has led equally to ethnic mistrust and under-development.

4. Political Competition for Power: The dreaded Boko Harm terrorists have only presented religious sentiments as their major grouse, the major reason for their sustained on slaughter against innocent citizens which they have failed to make public and for which notable northern elite have remained in sympathy with them, is Jonathan’s Presidency. “Dependable

sources in the north reveal recently that the terror attacks would be sustained in higher intensity until Jonathan's government faces devastation it cannot wriggle out from. If this chaos gets out of hand as it is likely to be, analysts fear that the ensuing reprisal attacks that will prove hard to control, may develop into a revolution that would confirm the prediction of the America's central intelligence Agency (CIA). It is for this reason of power tussle or competition for power that, since Jonathan took office in May 29, 2011 as an elected president, his government has been engulfed by chaos. Beginning from the past election violence that engulfed parts of the north in May 2011 till date, terrorist attacks in the north have remained on increase (Tentacle, February 26, 2012:22-23)".

"This happened in the first republic that resulted in coups and counter-coups that finally led to the civil war from 1967-70. This same thing repeated itself in the 2nd republic. It played itself again in June 12 that declared late Abiola the winner of the election that was annulled. This has been a re-occurring decimal in the Nigerian politics.

Conclusion/Suggestions

From the above, we have deduced that in spite of the points of criticism which we find in the working of the secular principles in Nigeria, we can say that, secularism is one of the basic elements in the process of modernization and it is the spirit which informs the constitution of Nigeria. On it depends the stability of Nigeria, the integration of the people of the sub-region divided by religion, tribe/ethnicity, and language. In the light of the above, it is suggested that:

1. The Nigerian State should remain steadfast with the tenants of democracy and, should always adhere to the spirit and principles of secularism enshrined in the constitution in its day to day activities.
2. No religion in Nigeria preaches violence. Therefore, any religious sect that is found resorting to violence in resolving of issues should be dealt with decisively.
3. Anyone found importing terrorism from across the borders to cause religions disharmony in the country should adequately be dealt with.
4. Any political outfit or organization in the country no matter how sacrosanct they may be, trying to use religion to garner votes during

election time should be proscribed for ten years as a deterrent to others.

5. Anyone found making inflammatory statements during election time or after elections to cause riots and creating religious problems should be charged for treasonable felony.
6. The Nigerian state no matter the pressure within or without despite the fact that majority population of the country are Muslims as made out by the colonial masters should not join any Islamic outfit to maintain its secular ideals.
7. The government of the day should not fund any institution or organization that is religious based or had aims of propagating religious doctrines in the country.
8. Nigerians should learn how to put the interests of the country first before their parochial, tribal, ethnic or religious interests because, the country is for all of us. Moreover, all religions should be regarded as equal before the eyes of the government.

Finally, and in the words of Obasanjo the past president of Nigeria, “Nigeria must develop a supra-national consciousness and Nigerians must shift their loyalties from their ethnic and regional cum religious groups to a new Nigerian nation. This does not in any way imply a strategy that denies the socio-cultural or ethnic roots of Nigerians, but taking advantage of our multiculturalism, multi-religiosity and multiple identities, all Nigerians must contribute to create one nation which all nationalities (majorities, minorities and sub-minorities alike), can identify with (Obasanjo: 2006:29)”.

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