

## ***Nigerian Foreign Policy: A Reflection of the Nation's Membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)***

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### **Abstract**

*Nigeria is a complex nation; this complexity is interwoven with colonial legacies that are deepened by linguistic differences and pluralism. Nigeria is a multi-religious state with Islam and Christianity constituting the dominant religious climate. Like Christianity, Nigeria's external relation has been shaped by Islam, especially with regards to the issues of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), Islamic banking, government involvement in hajj, Islamic public holidays, establishment of diplomatic relation with Islamic countries among others. It is true that OIC is a governmental organization because membership is restricted to states within the context of international law and that its headquarters is based in Saudi-Arabia-the bastion of Islam. It is within this understanding that this paper identifies the relationship between Islam and Nigeria's external policies to see how this has enhanced national development. The paper then concludes with the recommendations for effective utilization of aspects of Islam on the nation's external affairs for achieving sustainable national development.*

**Keywords:** External Relations, Islam, Religion, Secular and Development

## **Introduction**

Nigeria is a religiously pluralistic state. African traditional belief, Christianity and Islam constitute the religious climate in the country, with both Islam and Christianity enjoying the largest followership. The other beliefs with scanty disciples are the beliefs that claim secular humanism, which however are considered otherwise because of their inclinations to agnosticism and atheism (Ayinla, 2003). The adherents of each of these religions enjoy a great amount of religious freedom, both in the practice and propagation.

It is a truism that these religions, especially Christianity and Islam are quintessential factors in national politics, whether overtly or covertly. There is no disputing the fact that the national religions also constitute important elements in Nigerian external relations, through the foreign policy. This is in contradiction of the opinions of certain commentators that Nigeria is a secular state. That Nigeria is a secular state is not a reality because state machineries have been used and public funds have been expended to promoting Godly affairs. Some of the issues that border on state legitimization of religion in Nigerian politics expounded by Davies (1995:85-94) include government involvement in holy pilgrimage, oath taking, religious public holidays, religious ceremonies with official backing, teaching of religious studies in public schools, the establishment of diplomatic relation with the Vatican, which in international law is regarded as a state and the Pope so recognized as its Head of State and the Nigerian membership of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) among others.

Against this background, this paper reflects on the place of Islam in Nigerian foreign policy. To accomplish this objective, the study is designed into five sections. Section one deals with introductory aspect while section two examines the concept of foreign policy. Section three explores religious factor in Nigerian foreign policy. Section four is devoted to Islam in Nigerian foreign policy. Section five reflects on the discussion while section six is the conclusion.

## **Conceptual Framework on Foreign Policy**

The meaning of foreign policy differs from one scholar to the other even though some basic trends link the different definitions. Northedge (1974:15) defines foreign policy as the use of political influence to make other countries to behave in a way desired by state concerned. In this, Nwosu (1994:38) noted that there exists a symbiotic relationship between domestic and

external factors. This is to say that domestic issues are determinant factors in foreign policy making. Wallace (1971:17) describes foreign policy as state policy towards its international environment or as part of that international environment. This suggests therefore that the foreign policy of a state is intended to affect and is limited by factors outside the national politics.

According to Franke (1978:26-27), foreign policy is a range of actions, as well as set of principles shaping these actions, taken with reference to outside events and factor. It is the summation of thoughts, actions and principles on external events taken by decision-makers with the hope of achieving long-range goals and short-term objectives. From the foregoing, it is evident that foreign policy is formulated and executed basically for the international system. It is also necessary to point out that those only actions and in-actions taken by states could be considered as foreign policy.

### **Religion and Nigeria's External Relations**

It is pertinent to point out at the outset that Nigerian foreign policy is a symbiotic of her domestic or national political system. In this sense, religion constitutes a quintessential element of Nigerian domestic politics. The following issues prove apropos to the nation's legitimization of religion in her national politics, contrary to the belief in some quarters that the nation is a 'secular' state. For example, the preamble of the nation's constitution states *inter alia* that:

*We the people of the Federal Republic: Having firmly and solemnly resolved to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign Nation under God... (FRN Constitution, 1999).*

To a large extent this preamble to the 1999 constitution has shown the indispensability of God, the creator to the Nigerian nation state and its intrinsic dependability on him no matter how hard it is argued to the contrary. This is one way of putting the country under the canopy of the transcendent, sacred God. Other examples of religious influence in Nigerian domestic politics include observance of religious holidays of both Islam and Christianity, government involvement in pilgrimages to Makkah and Jerusalem (Oloso, 2004:507), the adoption of Islamic law (Shariah), official oath-taking based on the Bible and Qur'an, religious ceremonies with official backing (Davies, 1995:85-92). Sunday, which, according to Hesse

(1978:1322), has been made free in the interest of Christianity, is another proof of the religious status of Nigeria State. Official requests by the government that Muslims and Christians should offer prayers on certain occasions also belie the assertion that this country is a secular state. The use of cross as symbol in public hospitals equally weakens the case of the secularists (Oloso, 2004:507).

It is thus, a truism that political legitimization of both Islam and Christianity in the domestic politics is a reflection of religious legitimization in her foreign policy. Corroborating this fact, Davies (1995:93) noted that the Nigerian government has extended its act of balancing the interest of Christians and Muslims to its external relations while still proclaiming that Nigeria is a secular state. Examples abound; shortly after Independence, Nigeria established diplomatic relation with the Vatican which in international law is regarded as a state and the Pope so recognised as its Head of State; she also has an embassy in the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia.

During the regime of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, the Federal Government invited Pope John Paul to pay an official visit to Nigeria. The Shagari regime gave the Pope a reception befitting any visiting Head of State. The Pope's visit presented its own difficulties for the Nigerian government. The visit evoked public outcry especially from the secularists. Secularists saw it as a waste of public funds to host the visit of a religious leader. The Nigerian president tried to play down the criticism and allay the fears of the critics of the visit (Davies, 1995: 93).

### **Islam in Nigerian Foreign Policy**

One of the issues that have generated heated debate in the making and execution of Nigerian foreign policy is the OIC issue. A brief background information on the OIC will shed more light on its politics in Nigeria. The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) is an inter-governmental organization. It was established in Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco on 25 September 1969. The OIC expresses the determination of member states "to preserve Islamic social and economic values" and reaffirms their commitment to the United Nations (UN) Charter. The aims of the organization include among other things:

- Promoting Islamic solidarity among member states;
- Consolidating cooperation among member states in economic, social, cultural, scientific, and other vital fields of activity;

- Carrying out consultation among member states in international organizations;
- Endeavouring to eliminate racial segregation, discrimination, and colonialism in all its forms; and
- Supporting international peace and security founded on justice (Choudhury, 1995: 261-262).

The OIC is composed of the following main bodies, namely, the Conference of Kings and Heads of States and Government, the Conference of Foreign Ministers and the General Secretariat. In addition, there are some subsidiary organs through which member-states derive some economic benefits. Some of these organs include Islamic Centre for the Development of Trade, Islamic Development Bank and Islamic Foundation for Science, Technology and Development, etc.

It is a truism that OIC is linked with Islam; it is also true that it is a governmental organization because membership is restricted to states within the context of international law and that its headquarters is based in Saudi- Arabia, the bastion of Islam. However, its objectives are not just to promote Islamic solidarity but also to promote the economic and social development of member states. Similarly, the organization is purely a Third World affair because it has as its members Asian, Middle East and African states, majority of which have large Muslim population but do not proclaim Islam as their state religion (Davies, 1995: 94). It reaches beyond Muslim nations as a forum in which they can coordinate their interactions with the rest of the world (Choudhury, 1995: 262). It presently has fifty-seven member nations, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central African Republic and Thailand enjoin observer status (Francisco, 2001).

In Nigeria, the issue of OIC dates back to 1969 when the idea was first mooted with the support and encouragement of the then Sultan of Sokoto-Abubakar III. A delegation led by Abubakar Mahmood Gumi, went to Morocco to register Nigeria's presence in the meeting of OIC before the Head of State General Yakubu Gowon declared that the attendance of Gumi's delegation may be mis-constructed as a declaration of intent of Nigeria's membership of the organization. He therefore denied the delegation of any support by advising King Hassan of Morocco that the team was on its own and not representing Nigeria. Hence, the group was denied accreditation. It was, however, accorded an observer status (Ojo, 1999:97).

In 1986 however, Nigeria formally applied for full membership. According to Olaniyi (1995: 32), the admission of Nigeria to the organization was shrouded in secrecy. Little surprise, controversy ensued when it became an open secret that all necessary protocol and procedures were not observed. Professor Bolaji Akinyemi, the then External Affairs Minister whose ministry was supposed to handle the issue of membership claimed ignorance of the policy. In the same vein, the then Information Minister-Prince Tony Momoh claimed ignorance on the development (Ojo, 1999:98).

Despite the possible economic benefits that may accrue to Nigeria by virtue of its membership of the OIC and the assurance from the government that is not an attempt towards Islamisation, most Nigerian Christians were hyper-critical that Nigeria's membership of the OIC would not alter Nigeria's 'secular' status (Mazrui, 1986:93). Nigerian Christians have therefore demanded the withdrawal of the country from the OIC. Muslims on their own part have been vigorously supportive of Nigeria's membership of the OIC and referred to Nigeria's diplomatic relations with the Vatican as the necessary equivalence of Nigeria's membership of the OIC. They praised the government in its acts of balancing the interest of Christians and Muslims to its external relations but threatened that Muslims would demand a break in diplomatic relation with the Vatican should the government succumb to pressure and withdraw Nigeria's membership from the OIC (Davies, 1995:95).

As the debate raged on, the president inaugurated a twenty-man committee of four ministers, eight Christians and Muslim representatively to examine the consequences of Nigeria's membership of the organization (Olaniyi, 1995:33). The panel was chaired by Lt. Col. John Shagaya, the Minister of Internal Affairs (Ojo, 1999:99). However, the uncompromising postures of the adherents of the two dominant religions (Christianity and Islam) in the country over the issue rendered the presidential committee impotent. It nonetheless submitted a report to the government, which has not been made public since 1986.

The aftermath of this, is that the issue rekindled religious antagonisms and rivalries in the country. From that time onwards, Christians in various states across the country began to press for the establishment of separate Pilgrim Welfare Board-Christian Pilgrim Welfare Board. On its part, as a way of reducing the tension generated by the issue the government established a National Council for Religious Affairs (Olaniyi, 1995:33).

### Reflections

The following reflections are derived from the main concern of the paper:

- a. Nigeria is not a secular state but a multi-religious polity.
- b. Nigerian foreign policy is a symbiotic of her domestic or national political system.
- c. To a large extent this preamble to the 1999 constitution has shown the indispensability of God, the creator to the Nigerian nation state and its intrinsic dependability on him no matter how hard it is argued to the contrary.
- d. Political legitimization of both Islam and Christianity in the domestic politics is a reflection of religious legitimization in her foreign policy.
- e. Nigeria foreign policy is mostly affected by Islam in the membership of OIC.
- f. OIC is linked with Islam and it is a governmental organization because membership is restricted to states within the context of international law.
- g. There are economic benefits by virtue of Nigeria's membership of the OIC.
- h. Nigeria's diplomatic relations with the Vatican is the necessary equivalence of Nigeria's membership of the OIC.

### Concluding Remarks

In a brief form, this paper has highlighted the reflection of Islam in the Nigerian foreign policy. From the discussion, it is evident that Islam in Nigerian foreign policy is a necessary equivalence of her disposition towards Christianity in external relations. In as much as government continues to legitimize religion in her domestic affairs, the more credible it recognizes religious factor in the formulation and execution of her foreign policy. It is our humble submission that Nigeria's membership of OIC should not be seen as an attempt towards Islamisation but rather as a necessary equivalence of legitimization of Christian interests in her external relations.

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