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**RELIGION IN A SECULAR STATE AND STATE RELIGION IN PRACTICE:
ASSESSING RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE, TOLERANCE, AND NATIONAL
STABILITY IN NIGERIA AND MALAYSIA**

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Abstract: Some recent state formations are offshoots of religious societies where the elite clothed the state with religious apparel. Diverse communities and their beliefs compel many modern nations to adopt a secular state ideology in order to avoid religious domination of time. Constitutionally, Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, while the state has maintained peaceful co-existence among its religious groups with an emphasis on religious tolerance and improved wealth distribution. Conversely, Nigeria, constitutionally a secular state with shared populations of mainly Christians and Muslims, is embroiled in yearly religious conflicts. This article aims to show how Nigeria's secular state status is engulfed in religious bigotry due to institutional inadequacies. This is unlike Malaysia's state-centered influence on religion, yet its wealth distribution policy makes room for peaceful co-existence in its polity as against more severe challenges of corruption in Nigeria. The paper argues that leadership and institutional failures have exacerbated religious conflicts in Nigeria and hence the state totters in the face of tension. A theoretical debate unveils our proposition on religious practices in both countries. We rely on secondary data and empirical evidence in unveiling issues and conclude with modest recommendations.

Key Words: secular state, state religion, ideology, domination, conflict, leadership, management, flaws, credibility.

Issues of faith have become increasingly sensitive and crucial in the world today, pressuring many nations to adhere to the fundamental human rights that translate into freedom of worship for peaceful co-existence.¹ This article contends that the inhabitants of the area called Nigeria have always lived in divided as well as frequently litigious societies. Their boundaries have shifted continuously, ranging across and outside of those enclosed by the British in Nigeria.² Its three main ethnic groups are the Hausa/Fulani in the savannah region and the Yoruba and Igbo located in the tropical rain forest area. There are also a staggering number of minorities within these geographical settings. While a few ethnic groups have developed communal democracies, others have followed the path of developing into kingdoms, emirates, and even empires.³ It was the British incursion and its colonial rule that altered the patterns of political evolution, dismantling and pulling together diverse indigenous societies of remote origins and differentiated cultures and beliefs in what is today called Nigeria. While Islam was the dominant religion in the north before and during the colonial era, southern Nigeria was dominated by traditional religion that declined considerably with the coming of white missionaries. Hence the south became largely populated by Christians, with the southwest having some Muslims living side by side with Christians.⁴

Similarly, in Malaya (which later became Malaysia), British colonial rule influenced the indigenous Malays who were largely Muslims, the migrant Chinese and Indian populations of different religions, as well as other minorities of various orientations, to form Malaysia.⁵ Both countries adopted a federal system of government to accommodate their diverse interests. Nigeria's secular state status was meant for building a liberal state that would prohibit government officials from favoring religion and its oft-accompanying divisiveness and conflict. According to April A. Gordon, "Since independence, the Nigerian state has managed religious diversity through the constitutional stipulation that Nigeria is a secular state that guarantees freedom of religion and equality of all citizens."⁶

Conversely, Muslims form the largest population group in Malaysia, where Article 11 of the Constitution provides freedom for various ethnic religious practices. Article 3 (1) describes Islam as Malaysia's official religion.⁷ Rahim observes that since Malaysia's independence, Article 11 (1) has provided the right to profess and practice one's religion and [subject to Clause (4)] to propagate it. He also posits, "Instructively, Article 11's guarantee of religious freedom is almost identical to Article 25 of the secular Indian constitution. Malaysia's federal constitution has been aptly described as embodying the postcolonial 'spirit of *Merdeka*' (independence) rooted in the *wasatiyyah* (centrist, moderate, middle path) principles of accommodation, moderation, and tolerance."⁸ In spite of this development, Saravanamuttu argues that Malaysia's constitutional provisions since its independence in 1957 allow for what could be called a

“Muslim exceptionalism,” which has turned into the instrument for propagation of Islamic practices.⁹ In his perception on Nigeria, Douglas Patt positively describes secularism as “an ideology of peaceful co-existence of freedom of choice in matters of belief and association, and freedom of expression in matters of speech, arts, publication and worship.”¹⁰

Given the significance and explanatory goals the study invokes, a secular state is therefore a conception of secularism in which a nation-state is deemed to be formally unbiased on issues of religion by giving no support to religion or irreligion.¹¹ A secular state does not declare the superiority of a particular religion and is not involved in promoting religious doctrines, nor does it have any formal interest in setting up a particular religion within its territory. However, the state is not expected to detach itself completely from religious issues; rather the different religions should have permissible right given their status as secular organizations that can benefit from community financed police as well as emergency services.¹²

It should be noted that secularity of state was enshrined in the Nigerian and Malaysian constitutions at their independence. Although Islam is pronounced in Malaysia’s Constitution as the official religion, religious freedom is also stipulated in the same constitution. There have been constant shifts over the years in Malaysia toward an Islamic state, but the constitution has not been officially changed to that effect. For example, Sarwar looks at how the progressive push for sharia in Malaysia has been incrementally dismantled by the comprehensive imposition of state-led Islamization. Since Malaysian independence, its secular constitution has been altered 600 times through 45 amendments. All these amendments were driven by the BN (*Barisan Nasional* / National Front) coalition government with support from conservative Islamists who view the federal constitution as little more than a legacy of British colonialism.¹³ Yet confusion exists as the country has not been formalized as an Islamic state by the BN government.

Nigeria maintains its secular status, but with a certain amount of pressure from Islamic scholars, governors, and from the Islamic religious groups from the North, who regard secularism as a popular Western ideology. For example, Felix Agbara notes, “In Nigeria, the secularist question has endured, affecting inter-ethnic and inter-religious relationships. In many instances it has threatened the unity of the nation.”¹⁴ Agbara also reflects on the opinion of Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, a popular Islamic scholar, who supports the full implementation of Sharia, which he believes is consistent with the Nigerian Constitutional arrangement seen as non-secular but retaining a multi-religious character.¹⁵ Some Malaysian leaders have repeatedly declared Malaysia an Islamic state, and religion and government are currently intertwined. In contrast, the Nigerian government has not shifted from the country’s

secular position. However, Williams has pointed out that in spite of the secularity of Nigeria, the government has shown strong interest in the teaching of religion in public schools, maintaining Nigeria's place in the Organization of Islamic Conference, remaining active in the Pilgrims Welfare Board, and in assisting with the construction of churches, and mosques.¹⁶

Looking at a wider context for this discourse, recent historical development has shown Islamist revivalism. For example, the Ottoman Empire having ended in 1922, the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 led Rashid Rida and other Muslim scholars to advocate a gradual change of the Ottoman government by implementing more Islamic rules under an Islamic State.¹⁷ Similar recent developments in Malaysia and Nigeria underline differences in tolerance and extremism in the two countries. This motivates us to assess their ideological differences and the impact on the state. It is significant to point out that Muslims form two-thirds of the Malaysian population of approximately 30 million people.¹⁸ Currently, the Christian population in Malaysia is 9%. Islam is recognized as the state religion, while those of other faiths are encouraged to practice peacefully.¹⁹ The Constitution of Malaysia allows for freedom of religion (as earlier noted).²⁰ Apart from the 1969 race riots, the state has not experienced major religious upheavals; the few attempted acts of religious extremism were controlled.

Ideologically, Nigeria is a secular state of different beliefs, with a UN (2010) population figure of 158.2 million people.²¹ Currently, both Christian and Muslim population counts in the country are contested. For example, a source says "At present, Muslims make up roughly 50% of the population in Nigeria and live primarily in northern and southern Nigeria."²² However, Campbell asserts that "The country is home to one of Africa's oldest Islamic traditions, Christianity is much newer, but it has quickly grown to encompass 50% of Nigeria's population, with the greatest growth occurring during the past 30 years."²³ Recent statistics by a notable African Christian scholar maintain that Christians in Nigeria reached 46 percent by 2000 while 44 percent of Nigerians are Muslim. He argued that Christians have increased from 1% since 1900 to 50% of the population.²⁴ Other scholars estimate the number of Christians and Muslims as approximately equal.²⁵

Unlike Malaysia, Nigeria's main religious groups (Muslim and Christian) have for decades been engaged in deadly conflicts. This is seen in the current brutal killings in Jos where mass burial was recently given to a large number of slain citizens.²⁶ Boko Haram (which literally means "Book is Sinful," that is, Western education and Western life style are sinful, and not good for Muslims) is a violent terrorist organization in Northern Nigeria. Its attack is gradually spreading to other parts of the country, prompting questions as to whether the Federal Government is actually in control.²⁷ More than eleven thousand Nigerians lost their lives

between 1999 and 2006 under Obasanjo's regime and over three million refugees were internally displaced as a result of disputes over land and ethnic conflicts fueled by religious and ideological differences.²⁸

We are analyzing religious tolerance and intolerance as the dividing lines between religious harmony and religious conflicts in Malaysia and Nigeria respectively while observing the balancing influence of the state on co-existence. Economic issues are highlighted in this study to emphasize that both economy and religion are intertwined; spiritual longing is not detached from the quest for human flourishing. Also, apart from their post-independence religious challenges, we also discuss their pre-independence religious motivations and practices. The logic of this comparative study is premised on shared historical features. First, in terms of their multi-ethnic settings, we will examine divisions and conflicts between Malays, Chinese, and Indians in Malaysia's 60 ethnic groups. Similarly, Nigeria's three main ethno-religious groups, the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo, are known for their rivalries among Nigeria's 250 ethnic groups of largely tribal minorities. Other bases for comparison include religious composition, common colonial history, and nation-building efforts since 1957 (Malaysia) and 1960 (Nigeria). Our study underlines challenges posed by religion in both countries and its cost in terms of instability and the compelling task of the state in maintaining national unity and stability for the wellbeing of the citizens and for social progress.

The study is organized into five sections that focus our research and provide insight into the ideological views and religious challenges in the governance of both countries. The first section establishes the context for the study via a presentation of relevant background information. Then we discuss the relevant theoretical aspects of the investigation in order to evaluate the ideological views of the two states. The third section covers the analysis of our empirical data. The fourth section provides a lens through which the levels of tension can be viewed. Discussion of the research findings forms the fifth section and the paper concludes with recommendations.

State religion and secular state ideology in practice: A theoretical debate

Malaysia is a secular state with Islam as the official religion. Ideally, the political idea of secularism in the country seeks to locate it within the boundaries of a modern state. The "secular state" is conceptualized within the Western philosophical tradition but in large part the institutional norms of the "secular state" are today addressing the meaning of civic rights and political freedom in a non-Western context. It is reasoned that secularism may grant the right for one's freedom from any form of religious teaching, even compulsion from the government in a given state

that is impartial on issues concerning faith. This, however, suggests that individual actions and choices, particularly in the area of politics, should not be biased by religious influence.²⁹ But religious influence is sometimes located within the economic realm.³⁰ We reiterate the fact that there is a shift from secularity by the government of Malaysia towards a non-secular status. This has directly or indirectly intensified after Malaysia's racial riot in 1969 that led to the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP). NEP was an affirmative action adopted by the government to address economic disparities in the country whereby the indigenous Malays who were largely Muslims were identified with poverty. Apart from the government's compulsion on issues of the Muslims faith, economic considerations have largely influenced the government's attitude towards rural Muslims as is seen in the "special rights" that have both ethnic and religious connotations. This point is clearly seen in the numerous Islamic institutions presently springing up in the country.

To clarify economic issues in religion we can look to the research of P.R. Bhuyan, who reflects on Swami Vivekananda's work in India in which Vivekananda writes, "Religion is meaningless to a starving man. Man's mind is guided by his stomach." The stomach of such a person matters, without which all preaching and philosophy will have no effect on him. "Religion will stand supreme if it has an economic background ... Whenever any religion succeeds, it must have economic value. Thousands of similar sects will be struggling for power, but only those who meet the real economic problem will have it."³¹

Furthermore, it should be noted that among ethnically diverse and developing countries, Malaysia's colonial experience and post-independence nation-building of a pluralistic society appears comparatively peaceful and devoid of religious violence after the Cold War period. Malaysia is known as a model state that showcases the co-existence of large and diverse ethnic groups.³² While the Malaysian government is focused on development, it also devotes attention to improving the socioeconomic wellbeing of all its ethnic groups, which has resulted in interethnic harmony in the country because poverty has been reduced to 5%.³³ In spite of this feat, the state continues to engage in preferential policies called "special rights" to Malays, who are largely Muslim, and non-Malays describe these as discriminatory measures.³⁴ This sentiment is given additional impetus by numerous Islamic projects and government pronouncements while maintaining political stability in the country. As noted earlier, this is a shift from secularity by the Malaysian government towards Islamization of the country.

For example, there is strict restriction on conversion of Muslims to any other religion, although non-Muslims may convert to Islam. There has been a tendency to apply Islamic laws proscribing punishment for drunkenness, stealing, rebellion, and illicit sex.³⁵ As critics infer, the issue of preferential treatment has often raised aggrieved tensions on the side

of non-Malays and the state has been accused of engaging in Islamization through all forms of Islamic programs, provisions and institutions such as Islamic Bank, International Islamic University and expansion of Shariah courts, Islamic schools, and larger spaces for building mosques than are provided to less privileged religious groups.³⁶ Malaysia, in its religious inclination, has steadily shifted toward an ethno-religious nexus wherein the Malay ethnic identity is simply associated with commitment to Islam,³⁷ and traditional Malay cultural artifacts have to large extent transformed or been substituted by symbols of Islam in which both Malay and Muslim identities have really become intertwined.³⁸

Malaysia remains a typical example of a country that maintains co-existence of its main racial groups having separate identities wherein the state has adopted numerous preferential policies to manage its ethnic problems.³⁹ The state frequently symbolizes or replicates the current configuration of ethnic character in social order in broad terms. A strong and fairly independent state can play a significant role when it comes to intervention and reconciliation of interethnic feuds.⁴⁰ According to Shamsul, Malaysia's post-independence racial riot was severe and a watershed event in the political and sociological analysis of the country. He also posited, "Malaysia had since been in a state of 'stable tension,' which means that we have been living in a society dominated by many contradictions but we have managed to solve most of them through a continuous process of consensus-seeking negotiations, sometimes the process itself became a solution."⁴¹

Conversely, prior to the colonial influence in Nigeria, society was adorned with the practices of wide-spread traditional religions. Since these religions were infused in the way of life of the people they indeed qualified as state religions. Ikime sheds light on this religious inclination by various factions in Nigeria:

Among Nigeria's multifarious peoples, religion was inextricably mixed with government. The rituals performed by the Yoruba and Benin Obas, the Sarakuna of Hausaland, the Okpara, Obi or Eze of the Igbo, the Amakosuwei or Amanyano of the Ijaw, the Ivie or Oppako of the Urhobo and Isoko, etc. were an essential ingredient in the maintenance of political order and stability and the promotion of the people's moral code.⁴²

But traditional religion as the state religion was quickly consigned to the backwaters of history as Islam and Christianity took root. Williams observes that repeated violent religious conflict characterizes Nigerian history.⁴³ Since the Nigerian state came into being as a colonial creation by the British early in the twentieth century, the nation has been troubled by religious upheavals amid its status as a secular state. The difference

currently is the impulsion that is paradoxically inconsistent “with the entrenchment of secularity in the Nigerian Constitutions of 1979, 1989 and 1995.”⁴⁴

Unlike Malaysia’s restrictions on conversion, Section 10 of the 1979 Nigerian Constitution prohibits state religion. It says, “The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.”⁴⁵ Similarly, the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, Chapter IV, covering Fundamental Rights, states in section 38-(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.”⁴⁶ Given its constitutional provisions on religious space and practice, the Nigerian constitution is deemed truly secular in accommodating varied views. But our study is inclined to examine Malaysia’s relative peace and social progress even within certain restrictions as Islam remains constitutionally the state religion with its dominance, when contrasted with the tensions in Nigeria’s secular state and religious society. We argue that the underlying problem in Nigeria’s violence when contrasted with the considerable harmony in Malaysia can be pinpointed in Williams’ study that emphasizes “the tensions between a secular state and religious society that has plagued Nigeria through party politics and aborted elections, on one hand, and the delivery or withholding of social welfare services, on the other.”⁴⁷ This means that a society could slide into tension when economic necessities are lacking, as Williams demonstrates.

However, there are also divided views among people who believe that there is a causal relationship between religion and economy.⁴⁸ A school of thought also asserts that “economics is fundamentally atheist. Religious beliefs, practices, play no role in the life of homo economicus.”⁴⁹ But Dean et al. insist that there is coexistence between religion and economics in contemporary society.⁵⁰ Other scholars agree. For example, Sam Whimster notes that religion inherently has a social function; however, it is not automatically active. He also argues that “Economy and Society” seeks to provide an analysis of these complex interactions. Economic behavior is influenced by religious ethics; likewise religions are influenced by the factors of social stratification and political leadership.⁵¹ While stressing the “Failed City of God,” Pita Riga argues that creating an ideal state (which he calls the city of God on earth, governed by sacred law and revelation) lies at the heart of Islam. Riga criticizes the Western ideas of democracy, their compromise and corruption, and asserts that “Islam therefore must succeed in all areas - economic, social, political - or its divine origins would appear to be in doubt.”⁵²

A field study carried out by Thomas Joseph Ndaluka in Tanzania revealed that many Muslims in the country insisted that the Organization

of Islamic Conference (OIC) is not a religious but an economic organization; they argued, “The Vatican has been here since Nyerere’s era and we have not complained, but the OIC is an economic institution, not a religion.” They believe that OIC is an organization that offers economic benefits to the country that their government was reluctant to join. They needed their government to join since it has benefited other African countries.⁵³ All these views are consistent with similar views in the introductory section that align with Malaysia’s strategy. This is partly a lens to view religious conflict in Nigeria as largely triggered by a frustrating lack of economic necessities. Religious issues have promoted violence and displacement of persons orchestrated by an “exaggerated Islamic claim that unless Nigeria becomes an ‘Ummah’ there can be no peace”.⁵⁴ This has exposed Nigeria to years of sectarian violence instigated by both religious extremists and certain individuals for political motives.

This has caused severe destabilization of the overall protection of the diverse groups that constitute the entity called Nigeria.⁵⁵ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) findings revealed that “The government of Nigeria continues to respond inadequately and ineffectively to recurrent communal and sectarian violence. Religion is a driving force in the violence, as a precipitating factor or proxy for political or social issues. Years of inaction by Nigeria’s federal, state and local governments has created a climate of impunity, resulting in thousands of deaths.”⁵⁶

Hypothetical Assumptions

We point out that religious conflicts that presently characterize many countries in the world largely have deep-rooted structural causes due to diminished or diminishing resources that instigate intergroup agitation or dominance under the guise of religious justification.

Method and Data

The field study focused on 16 selected respondents largely drawn from the three main ethnic groups in each country. The 32 respondents were deemed appropriate for wide coverage of diverse views of ethno-religious affiliations and interests in both countries. Respondents’ age variations of 40-65, and 65-85 were considered important to cover contemporary as well as historical facts about each state’s religious practices and the level of national stability. Respondents’ educational attainments and their official positions in the state or in civil society were also considered in the interview process as essential to extract the required information. The approach we adopted in this study is social-anthropological. Given the fact that this study investigates the complex interconnectedness involving people’s beliefs as well as their actions, a

method that incorporates existing experiences of a targeted public that looks at their language, the way they reason, and their general perception was the major focus, examination, and interpretative goal. The method chosen for data collection and analysis was consistent with qualitative fieldwork studies demonstrated in the works of Glazer and Strauss.⁵⁷ We incorporated this method because it is able to combine a variety of data gathering methods that also allows for the generalization of analysis grounded in recorded data concerning crisis development.

The research methodology used involved participant observation, in-depth interviews as well as secondary data analysis. Two separate fieldwork interviews for Nigeria and Malaysia were carried out. Due to strong religious cleavages in both countries, the research questions were meant to unveil levels of tolerance and intolerance and the influence of the state in view of differences in national stability and instability. In other words, the research questions were meant to test their understanding as to why, how, and to what extent religion has impacted national stability and the wellbeing of citizens. The main source of primary data for the research was key information generated from open-ended interviews.⁵⁸ The research was conducted in Nigeria between 7th of June to 1st of August 2010 whereas in Malaysia it lasted from September 1st to October 15th of 2010. Both were concluded later between January and May 2012.

Data Analysis

Results

Religious tolerance and intolerance are seriously manifest in Nigeria. Comments from all the respondents interviewed documented this.

No, religious tolerance is almost at zero level mainly in the North, there will be no end to ethnic and religious killings in Nigeria so long we pretend about nation building and the sacrifice it entails. We appear not to know what it takes to build a great nation. It takes persistent sacrifice on the part of the leaders in all their ways and their doings, in both words and actions for a great nation to evolve.⁵⁹

Religious intolerance has become a big challenge to the country. It is a problem that escalates from time to time, sometimes with huge casualties figures. It is a problem that remains unresolved (Shared comments: R2,⁶⁰ R3⁶¹ R4⁶², R5⁶³ and R6⁶⁴). Religious tolerance is virtually nonexistent while religious intolerance is high in the country.⁶⁵ R8 has rhetorically asked, "Is there an end in sight to religious killings and violence in the country?" He also noted, "Religious violence is born of lack

of understanding. When people of faiths are properly educated to understand that no one religion is superior to another, then they could co-exist peacefully.”⁶⁶ The Boko Haram insurgency has heightened the pre-existing religious intolerance.⁶⁷ The problem is caused by Northern religious leaders who are conservative and intolerant. They believe that they will convert Southerners to Islam through a bloody Jihadist.⁶⁸

There is a growing notion that in the public domain that most ethno-religious conflicts, especially in Northern Nigeria, are fueled by local politicians. The yearly record of religious crisis is enormous, yet nothing serious is done to fully prevent reoccurrence (shared comments: R11⁶⁹ and R12⁷⁰). Now there is a high level of intolerance among some Muslim youths who are asking for abolition of Western education (shared comments: R13⁷¹ and R14⁷²). The government acted fairly by instituting interreligious dialogue, which has existed for many years now, but what is happening on the ground does not show that much has been achieved (Shared views by R15,⁷³ with R8, & R1). There does appear to be considerable religious tolerance in Nigeria, and what appears to be religious intolerance in some areas of the country is the outcome of unscrupulous and callous manipulation of religion sentiments for personal gains.⁷⁴

According to *Resp. A*, in Malaysia laws exist indicating that certain religions are state religions, and laws also exist indicating that certain states are secular states. What is important is the implementation. *Resp. A* also noted, “Sometimes we say we are secular but we do things that are non-secular. It is the spirit of day to day practice that is more important. Whether religion is a state religion or secular, a lot depends on the interpretation. Where leaders are very careless and encourage racism for political reasons, then that is a great danger. But majority of Malaysians are tolerant.”⁷⁵

According to former Prime Minister of Malaysia, *Resp. B.*, Malaysia has historically been known for religious tolerance. Muslims in Malaysia follow the teachings of Islam, but the problem with Islam, like many other religions, is that a variety of interpretations of Islam are possible. We believe that if one goes back to the teaching of the Koran, the basis of Islam, the correct interpretation is made clear. The Koran insists that in anything we do we must be just. Whenever you judge, judge with justice. We must ensure justice not only to Muslims but to non-Muslims as well. “You oversee their needs and they continue to prosper in the country so that there is not much conflict, nor is there any oppression of non-Muslims; the teaching of Islam does not ask us to oppress non-Muslim.”⁷⁶ The premier also noted:

We have lived peacefully with other races right from the time we were a feudal state and the time when we were under British rule. We accepted that these other races have their religions, and at that

there should be justice. We have two laws, Islamic law and British Common Law. If we impose Islamic law on them, there is likely to be instability and Islam forbids that. Most of the time we allow those accused to be tried under British Common Law, and it applies to all and the sentence is the same, whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims. If you apply Muslim law to Muslims, others will be punished the way Muslims will be punished. So we have to be careful so that in administering the law in this country you do not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims in terms of the sentence, and in terms of justice they must be the same.⁷⁷

Resp. C noted, “We do not have such religious intolerance here in Malaysia. We are peaceful. Our religion does not teach us a negative way to others. In my family we have Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists and we are together, we do not have problems. We can live in one house.”⁷⁸ Religious tolerance is at a high level. People recognize churches and other places of worship. There is a great amount of tolerance in the country.⁷⁹

However, further insight from *Resp. E* revealed that,

Malaysia is predominantly an Islamic country. The constitution states freedom of religion very clearly but unfortunately freedom of religion is in reality not true. There is a restriction in Malaysia that Christians are not allowed to share their faith with Muslims. Muslims are not allowed to be found in a church building. There have been raids in churches and unfair intimidation so to speak. The right for a Malay to choose his own faith is absolutely out of the question in Malaysia.⁸⁰

Similarly, *Resp. F* noted “Religious tolerance is relatively good where there is freedom of worship despite the fact that there are so many religions in Malaysia. However, the majority is Muslim, as Malays born in Malaysia are already embraced by Islam (as Muslims) and people of other faiths are not allowed to preach to Muslims as it is against the law/constitution, which is actually religious intolerance.”⁸¹

According to *Resp. G*, “Malaysian government could be rated 95% successful in maintaining religious tolerance, or in fact interreligious tolerance. Malaysia’s multiethnic and multi-religious nature makes it vital that the government will make religious tolerance an aspect of national unity.”⁸² Other respondents opined that the country has done reasonably well in religious tolerance (*Resp. H*⁸³ & *Resp. I*⁸⁴) and that religious tolerance is at an acceptable level.⁸⁵ For *Resp. K* “The government has given a fair opportunity for all religions. Nobody is deprived of his or her religion. We

have literally done well there, that is why we are united. If we have not done well we would have created civil strife then.”⁸⁶ Malaysians are tolerant because they realize they can benefit by being peaceful.⁸⁷ According to *Resp. M*, Malaysia as a Muslim country is ahead of all Muslim countries in being more peaceful and tolerant. He also posited, “We are above. Our women (Muslim women) are in education, where 70% of our universities are filled by women, even heads of departments. However, there are still those who are wrong-headed, but generally speaking we are the best.”⁸⁸ *Resp. N* threw more light on religious matters when he noted:

The use of the notion “Islamic State” is not correct for Malaysia, it is Dr Mahathir’s claim. Malaysia is a Muslim majority in this country and that is all. There are more Muslims in China than in Malaysia. However, idealism has put religion in a very central place that is under the control of each Negri State... For me religious tolerance is very high; just because three people fall out of love, it does not mean this country is intolerant, but there is a difference that you need to notice between what I call authority defined by the nation-state’s base implementation of Islam. There is an Islamization process by the authority in the sense that they are trying to highlight Islam. Is Islamization the model in Malaysia, or is the model the modernization of Islam? The level of tolerance is very high from my point of view because without that there will be conflict all the time.⁸⁹

Religious tolerance in the country is encouraging despite small radical elements in different religious groups that do not enjoy strong support from the general public.⁹⁰ Very few use the issues of race and religion for political gain. Once in a while we read in the newspapers of sporadic events but the state is generally peaceful and there is tolerance.⁹¹

Further Engagements

Religion had real influence in the pre-independence eras of Nigeria and Malaysia. For example, it contributed positively to the development of the *Ulama* (Experts) in Malaysia whose ideas accentuated the call for society to embrace modernity and welcome reforms of mainstream Islam. The impact of Islam in the development and social change in Malaysia draws on *Al Imam*, an Islamic Journal of 1908 that raised certain issues that were critical of the “Kerajaan.”⁹² The Journal’s criticism reads, “If the ‘Raja’ (i.e traditional political ruler) happens to be ignorant, of bad character, low ambition, greedy, narrow minded and so forth, then his

action will lead to the downfall of the community (*ummah*)..."⁹³ Muslim intelligentsia could be viewed from their insights into socio-religious, economic, and political issues made evident in the *Islamic Journal*. Al Imam censured individuals who should not be honored, especially the Malay traditional political elite, due to certain roles they played in the society.⁹⁴

The Malay Muslim intelligentsia while operating within the realm of Islam always stated their open nationalist thoughts that could be accommodated in a secular movement. As far back as early 20th century, Malay Muslim intelligentsia casually associated progress and development of the society with the political leadership of the society.⁹⁵ The Malay Muslim intelligentsia had a broad mind as they welcomed modernity, while the *Journal* recognized that the advantage Europeans and Japanese had over Malaya people was their superior knowledge that helped these races to flourish. Failure to acquire education leads to dreadful human conditions and an inability to realize self-actualization.⁹⁶

In contrast, the rulers and scholars in the north who benefitted most from the protection of traditional structures maintained policies that strictly protected traditional institutions and opposed western education. This led to arrested development in Northern Nigeria in the 20th century by insistence on the status quo. It strictly protected traditional institutions and opposed Western education and people never questioned leaders on accountability. There was a concerted effort by the emirs in collaborating with conservative colonial officials in Northern Nigeria to resist Western education due to fear of its potency in producing people of a critical mindset who might rise up to question the status quo.⁹⁷ As the Malay Muslim intelligentsia was guided by Al Imam, so also was the Northern Nigeria Muslim intelligentsia attracted to a poem composed by one of the members of the northern Muslim intelligentsia who was close to the ruling class. This was due to signs of interaction with southerners and British officials. The poem reads:

Whoever wears suits with buttons, he has
apostatized
He has no religion at all, only pride
His state is the state of the makers of silver dollars,
They are beyond our power to imitate,
One who wears shirts with collars,
Whoever wears them, his unbelief is wide ...
certainly on the Last Day the Fire is his dwelling.⁹⁸

Thus, poems became tools in the hands of Muslim intellectuals in Northern Nigerian to influence the social life of their people. One poem by Sa'adu Zungur, a highly regarded Muslim scholar of northern origin, demonstrates chauvinism against those they regarded as more educated

pagan ethnic groups than the Hausa-Fulani. Abdullahi, another poet, was brother to the leader of the Jihad in Northern Nigeria that began in 1804; and he later became the leader of the Caliphate in the North. Mallam Sa'adu Zungur's poetic verse reads, "O chief Abdullahi, help us ...do not let the pagan enter into them to spread the poison of republicanism."⁹⁹

These leaders who were of the Fulani Jihad of Northern Nigeria claimed genealogical descent from the Prophet Mohammad and so justified whatever they did on the bases of their direct link to him. It is unheard of within their circle to criticize these jihadists. The situation never gave room for reform and any restructuring from below was seen by these conservative leaders as the thoughts of the infidels as well as those planning to revolt against Islam. It was these leaders who succeeded the Fulani Jihad of Northern Nigeria that formed the first political party to represent their interest in the federation of Nigeria.¹⁰⁰ At independence in 1960, they also brought their religious values to the new secular state. The Fulani Jihadists and other Northern Nigerian leaders were of the view that not only had their direct relationship with the Prophet Muhammad earned them the right to rule, but to keep on ruling pending the time that the reformer known as Mahdi will appear to revitalize their theocracy. The mandate to rule is quoted thus:

Sardauna, Ahmadu Bello, praise to Allah,
 Descendant of the saint, Usman, who does not
 sleep...
 We pray the Glorious God, the King in truth
 NPC (i.e Northern Peoples' Congress)
 May it have mastery over Nigeria
 For the sake of Sidi 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani
 Your rule will last until the appearance of Mahdi.¹⁰¹

The differences between Malay Islam and Northern Nigeria Islam stems from the Malay quest for exposure, zeal to appropriate and appreciate modernity, and openness to change, all of which are contrary to the conservative and dogmatic approach characteristic of the Nigerian counterpart. As Hitti observes, the increase of adherents of Islam from the Hejaz region to Saudi Arabia turned out to be a historical development and its appearance across the world has also intensified sharp differences amongst regions of the world.¹⁰² In other words, the foregoing explains a considerable religious moderation in Malaysia in contrast to Nigeria. We argue that religion has been part of the historical process of change as well as resistance to change. This is further emphasized by Marc Block who asserts that Islam took a center stage in any program meant to promote special development and transformation of Northern Nigeria due to its influence over any method adopted to justify social change. Islam was not exclusive concerning forces that impede social transformation,

because during the medieval era in Europe Christianity was similarly exploited.¹⁰³

We submit that Malaysia would be able to advance faster given its openness to change and moderation. However, earlier wrong teachings resisted reforms, hindered development, and created a strong religious divide that future generations of Northern Nigerian Muslims embraced. The current poverty in Northern Nigeria is self-induced, a manifestation of an economically backward society that is bound to social strife.

Era of Tension

In Malaysia, the most disturbing challenge the country faced at any time in its history was perhaps the religious tension created by Darul Arqam in 1990s. The tension started with the activities of Darul Arqam, which was a religious body established in 1968 by Ustaz Ashaari Mouhammad, who championed the course of this group until its demise in October 1994.¹⁰⁴ The clandestine activities of this religious body that operated for some years were halted by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's vituperative assaults against the organization. Mahathir's effort helped to curb its influence, thus creating room for a peaceful political environment for his vision to continue uninterrupted, even as the problems posed by Arqam seemed nonpolitical.¹⁰⁵ The harsh moves by the state authority against Darul Arqam were done under purely religious considerations and never political ones; hence Anwar Ibrahim who was the Deputy Prime Minister insisted that action against Darul Arqam was due to the manner the group abused religious teachings.¹⁰⁶ People were suspicious and became terrified of militants assuming power in Malaysia.¹⁰⁷ For a harmonious co-existence, in 1996 and 1997 Prime Minister Mahathir rose up to oppose plans for *hokum hudud*, "God's Punishment including amputations, lashes and stoning,"¹⁰⁸ in addition to implementation of Muslim dress codes. Mahathir further tried to limit the *Sharia* court under the supervision of the Federal government to disallow states ruled or prejudiced by the Pan-Malaysian Islamist Party in opposition (PAS) not to make interpretation of *Sharia* verdicts that could undermine the course of action of the Federal government.¹⁰⁹ In an effort to create an enduring harmony and probably counteract PAS hard-liners, Mahathir's regime set up new Islamic institutions, namely the Islamic Banking and finance Institute, the Institute of Islamic Understanding, and the International Islamic University Malaysia.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, tension was generated in 1998 when PAS took a hard-line approach to implementing *Sharia* law and proposed a bill in the Federal Parliament that established the death penalty for any one converting from Islam to another religion.¹¹¹ The PAS-induced tension worsened in the 1999 election in which it won the state of Terengganu and 27 seats in the Federal parliament, making itself a strong opposition party.¹¹² The rising power of PAS induced Prime Minister Mahathir to

declare in 2001 that Malaysia fulfills the condition for an Islamic state.¹¹³ In spite of such attempts at appeasement, PAS threatened to additionally Islamize the government and judiciary in Malaysia within the PAS-controlled government of Terengganu and in 2002 unveiled plans to amend its constitution in order to introduce *hukum hudud*.¹¹⁴ Changes occasioned by hard-pressing Islamic PAS led to the introduction of dress codes for tourists and closed pubs, karaoke places, unisex hair salons, all gaming centers in Terengganu, and implemented gender segregation aisles at supermarket counters.¹¹⁵ This PAS-induced tension while applying Islamic law in governance climaxed in 2002 when the PAS controlled state of Kelantan fined 120 Muslim women for violating the Islamic dress code.¹¹⁶ However, October 2003 brought sweeping changes when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over from Mahathir as the Prime Minister and took a more oppositional posture against PAS, declaring a new approach to Islam: *Islam Hadhari* or “civilizational Islam.”¹¹⁷

On the other hand, Nigeria has since the 1970s exhibited religious violence and conflicts that have helped to shape its volatile political arena. The situation in Nigeria is that Christians and Muslims are separated and the separation is made worse by long-standing intra-religious conflicts that further segregate the people. The uneven distribution of people of both faiths has helped to locate the majority of Muslims in the north and some in the center of the country, while the southeast is predominantly Christian and the southwest has equal representation of both faiths.¹¹⁸ At Nigeria's independence, the most destabilizing factor was ethnicity and since then religious violence which is as disruptive as ethnicity has taken the center stage. Within a short time of independence over a dozen religious riots had claimed many lives. Since mid-1970s politicians have asked their members to vote along religious lines; hence parties maintain ethno-religious lines.¹¹⁹ The adoption of the constitution in 1978 generated tension in the 1978 election as politicians campaigned by manipulating religious symbols and values; the rejection of the recitation of the national anthem and pledge of allegiance by the Jehovah's Witnesses exacerbated the situation. In 1980 the Maitatsine religious crisis in the Northern Nigeria claimed thousands of lives and property worth millions of naira was destroyed.¹²⁰ Given the development of Maitatsine violence, scholars like Rosalind Hackett expressed shock over what seemed to be a millennialist Islamic movement that had assumed metonymic status in the psyche of Africa's largest populated country. In spite of the death of its leader in 1980, subsequent uprisings from his followers have continued to sustain fear in the country.¹²¹

In October of 1982 eight Churches were burned in the city of Kano while intra-Islamic violence claimed two lives and injured hundreds of people. In the same manner a major riot in Kaduna claimed at least four hundred lives the same year, while in 1984 violence intensified by Muslims in Yola and Jimeta, consuming approximately seven hundred people

including police and leaving nearly six thousand people homeless. Gombe, a neighbouring town, was also besieged and more than one hundred people were killed. In another scenario, police dispersed a large crowd of Muslims at the National Theatre in Lagos. This was followed by an attack by Muslim students with swords, cutlasses, and broken bottles on other students at Usmandan Fodio University in Sokoto. During this period, Christians clashed with Muslims on Palm Sunday in the Ilorin, the capital of Kwara state, leading to the destruction of three churches.¹²²

The introduction of Sharia in the country in early 2000 led to a bloodbath in which hundreds of Christians (mostly Ibos) were killed, thereby raising fresh ethnic tension.¹²³ Nigeria has lost over 12,000 of its citizens in a dozen incidents since 1999.¹²⁴ Okorie summarizes the situation thus: "In this our beloved nation, religion is an instrument of division among its people. This day, the elders and frustrated leaders now make use of the youth in trying to achieve some selfish purpose through religious bigotry".¹²⁵ This development since 2010 has shown worsening ethno-religious tragedies including mass killings in Jos. Bulldozers dug large graves for mass burial of victims, providing a horrible site of human carnage of the unprotected citizens of a nation.¹²⁶ The literature on religious killings in Nigeria is overwhelming, and cannot be fully covered in this paper. Apart from the Christian-Muslim divide, tension, and brutal killings, other scenarios show communal clashes with a religious undertone. Similar killings of non-Muslims by Boko Haram are sometimes extended to killing other Muslims in a move to coerce other Muslims to accept their ideological goal.

Discussion of Research Findings

There is a problem of religious bigotry in Nigeria. Respondents R2, R3, R4, R5 & R6 maintained that Nigeria was in the grip of unresolved religious intolerance and conflicts. As R10 observed, religious discrimination and killings were calculated attempts to forcefully convert southerners to Islam through jihadist bloodshed. This can be viewed in the light of William's study, highlighted earlier in this paper, which states that "unless Nigeria becomes an *Ummah* (an Islamic community), there can be no peace." Religious killings in Northern Nigeria are partly linked to politicians who R10 & R16 described as conservatives who fuel religious conflict for their personal political gain. For example, the Nigerian Human Rights Watch not only warned of the killings but also advised that the federal government should take adequate measures to protect citizens in the country, especially in the North, which is prone to violence and communal clashes, while it also issued warnings about extrajudicial killings.¹²⁷

Northern Nigeria is volatile, and failed attempts at resolving religious tensions in the region have left the public with doubt. R8 asked whether

there could be an end to such carnage. This has now created a climate of impunity as documented by USCIRF (2010). While Nigeria is challenged by religious issues, Cohen and Sandhu offer New Delhi as an example of a community that has learned how to manage ethnic movements using force when necessary and then accommodation.¹²⁸ All the respondents in Nigeria decried continual intolerance resulting in violent killings, which indicates that existing inter-religious dialogue in the country has failed to address the problem. In Malaysia, religious tolerance is the norm. However, *Resp. A & Resp. B* (the former premier of the country) emphasized wrong interpretations of religious matters as a source of problems. These respondents maintained that Malaysians were tolerant. *Resp. B's* earlier goodwill message to Malaysians in December 1998 attests to this when he said:

Malaysians are fortunate and should be thankful that the spirit of tolerance they practice has reinforced unity among them and the economic difficulties and attempts to spark off riots failed to create disharmony among the masses. We should learn from events in other countries whose economic problem have led to clashes among followers of different religions...visiting one another during festive celebrations can forge closer relations between the multi-racial and multi-religious Malaysians and help preserve peace in the country.¹²⁹

Given the 95% claim of religious tolerance by *Resp. G*, the image of Malaysia on the subject is strengthened. Also, given the general consensus on Malaysia's religious harmony, this study highlights its maintenance of peaceful co-existence and religious tolerance. However, both *Resp. E & Resp. F's* views on religious restriction are consistent with the study done by Douma et al. The Muslim family as administered through the Sharia court has the potential to restrict religious freedom. For example, Sharia does not allow marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims.¹³⁰ Malaysia's Sharia courts have been reluctant to permit Muslims to convert to other religions. While freedom of religion in Malaysia is protected by the constitution, the primacy of Islam and its influence on the federal and state governments can be restricting and sometimes discriminatory for adherents of other religions.¹³¹ *Resp. M* gave reasons why Malaysia is the best among all Muslim countries in its tolerance and harmonious living, which captures the views of other respondents too. These include appreciable moderation and mutual respect, avoiding "sensitive issues" and good economic welfare. These factors jointly define Malaysia's culture of peace.

Summary of Findings

This study has shown how the state capacity is very vital in managing religious intolerance. The findings in the study are the following: First, both Nigeria and Malaysia are religious societies wherein the primacy of religion is evident. Whereas early 20th century Muslims in Malaysia welcomed education and modernity and opposed the influence of corrupt elites, Muslims in Northern Nigeria seriously opposed both education and modernity as shown in Al Imam reports and popular poetry. Malaysia and Nigeria's pre-independence religious movements define their current levels of harmony and extremist postures respectively.

Second, analysis of data collected from the two countries reveals variations in religious tolerance and intolerance. The manifestation of religious intolerance in Northern Nigeria is shown in regular conflict and massacres, as respondents shared. Conversely, Malaysia demonstrates considerable religious harmony as made evident in almost all the reports. Its restrictions on Muslims from converting to other religions while allowing other religions to convert to Islam is an exception that is deemed an unfair double standards.

Third, given the volume of literature on the incidents of religious violence in both countries, the study has shown how coercive force of law was applied to calm extremism in Malaysia. But similar religious extremists in Northern Nigeria escape the wrath of the law, enabling continual carnage in the country.

Fourth, our hypothesis and theoretical debate revealed that the management of religious issues cannot be understood in an abstract sense because an ethnicized state religious policy in Malaysia with enhanced economic distribution policy across groups has led to national stability. Mahathir's view (quoted above) further validates our argument (along with the corroborating views of many other scholars documented in the debate) when he says, "We should learn from events in other countries whose economic problem has led to clashes among followers of different religions..." Similarly, Halabi is of the view that extremism is induced by economic factors in which political marginalization further exacerbates the rate at which the youths in the Muslim world join anti-West terrorist groups.¹³² On the other hand, Nigeria's constitutional provision on secularity is classic but ineffective management of religious crisis. Institutional inadequacy has led to failure to use coercive force of law to restrain extremism and in meeting the economic needs of its people.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated how religion imposes huge challenge on the governance of a state today and how religion and the two countries are intertwined. Through historical and contemporary events explored in

the study, Malaysia's open-mindedness on issues of religion and social progress are contrasted with its dogmatic and conservative Northern Nigerian counterpart. We emphasize that peace recorded in Malaysia is based on commitment to public welfare and well-enforced laws that Malaysian citizens have come to embrace. Conversely, the inability of the Nigerian authorities to rise above the menace of religious extremism has led to many vulnerable citizens slaughtered at will by overzealous fundamentalists. Even where poverty and economic necessities may have contributed to the emergence of frustrated religious elements in Nigeria, the state has not given full priority to addressing the problem. Also, its coercive force has not been effective to control violence and deter crimes, and hence poor governance has exacerbated the instability of the state, which totters due to reactions from its fragmented ethno-religious groups.

The study is a lens for Nigeria to view Malaysia's path as more effective in combining moderation with economic growth in order to remain politically stable with harmonious relations between its different ethnic groups. Nigeria has much to learn from Malaysia's policies of religious and economic balance. Haque, William, and other scholars have demonstrated the significance of providing room for those economic needs that are not diminished by religious passion. This lesson is profound in the entire context.

The study has also shown that while Malaysia's success is lauded, the state still harbors remote tensions. First, its special rights to Malays, which grieve non-Malays, could be narrowed to a particular item since poverty in the country has been reduced to 5%. Second, Malaysia is considerably more peaceful, but policy issues on religion should be balanced and fair to all given the fact that such issues touch on people's freedom, psychology, and perception. Allowing non-Muslims to convert to Islam while restricting conversion of Muslims to other religions demonstrates double standards. It also impinges on human rights and personal freedom, which may need to be relaxed for the sake of a self-fulfilling spiritual life for the greatest number of Malays.

Similarly, Nigeria needs a responsive mediating central authority with workable policies that are backed by strong state institutions. All these are required for achieving a fair distribution of wealth and genuine religious dialogue to realize the desired national stability and growth. This is the challenge that confronts Nigeria today as a secular state. Consideration given to the foregoing will help Nigeria to overcome religious prejudice and social strife. Finally, further reforms in law enforcement strategies will help Nigeria to assume full control through force of law against religious extremists while maintaining its secular posture for national unity, stability, and social progress.

Further research should be devoted to examining the growing pressure for the implementation of Islamic law in both countries and its implication on the states and secularism.

Notes

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