

Threats to religious freedom in Nigeria

Analysis of a complex scenario

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Abstract

Nigeria currently grapples with an unprecedented spate of sectarian violence, which continues to take a debilitating toll on the people. Although the country is no stranger to communal violence related to religion, which in the last twelve years has claimed thousands of lives, the present situation is unique in terms of the nature, geographical scope and terrorist dimension of the violent insurrection led by, but not limited to, the militant Islamist sect Boko Haram. The mass exodus of people from the troubled northern areas to the southern region and the mounting clamour by mostly southerners for a Sovereign National Conference, in which the different ethnic and religious groups would come together to reassess the basis of their living together, are indications that the ongoing sectarian violence is a sign of a national tragedy with far-reaching ramifications. The purpose of this article is to show that the present sectarian crisis in Nigeria is a part of an enduring and evolving wave of religious rights violations that continue to thrive unabated. We argue that both structural and direct violence against Christians in northern Nigeria are linked. The article also highlights the responses of the Nigerian Christian community to persecution. In the final analysis, it is important to acknowledge that there are many among Christians and Muslims who share the vision of living in peace with one another. This can be encouraged if the two religions work to discard stereotypes against each other. By doing so, the clamour for greater religious freedom is likely to become a joint project for adherents of both religions and other citizens who embrace the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

Keywords Ethno-religious conflicts, sectarian violence, insurgency, religious freedom, persecution and Nigeria.

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Among the plethora of problems that undermine human development in Nigeria, ethno-religious conflicts rank high. Corruption and bad governance which are widespread thrive while rent-seeking politicians exploit ethnic and religious sentiments (Amundsen 2010). The ambivalent role of religion in the Nigerian social and political crisis is complex. As Obianyo (2010) observes, religion serves as both a unifying and a divisive factor in Nigeria. It unifies Nigerians who share the same beliefs across ethnic divides, and simultaneously creates a contending relationship between the religious groups.

The instrumentalisation of religion for the purpose of achieving political and economic gains by the elites can cause severe havoc to a country. However, the rigid pursuit of the religious vision of creating a religiously homogenous society in a certain territory is capable of causing even greater harm to a diverse society. The second role of religion is common in countries with high degrees of religious nationalism, and where most people consider religion as the most important identity.² With a population of over 160 million,³ 250 ethnic groups, about 400 languages, 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory, divided into six geopolitical zones, and with Christianity and Islam and a variety of African traditional religions, Nigeria is inherently a mosaic of diversities. Since its independence from Britain in 1960, the country has been plagued by ethnic and religious tensions that have undermined its quest for the evolution of a model of multiculturalism that would nurture and sustain unity and peaceful coexistence among its diverse populace (Ukiwo 2009).

In this article we would explore threats to religious freedom in Nigeria, and in particular the situation of Christians in the country. Our main proposition is that endemic religious intolerance, which has been the order of the day in northern Nigeria, and the struggle to reintroduce historic Islamic dominance in the region through the vehicle of religious extremism, are the twin drivers of Christian persecution in Nigeria. The daily experiences of Christians, who are marginalised and deprived of their citizens' rights in many parts of northern Nigeria, especially in the Sharia states,⁴ have been largely overshadowed by the frequent reports on sectarian

² A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey in 2006 indicates that 91% of Muslims and 76% of Christians in Nigeria consider religion as the most important identity, and only 3% of Muslims and 9% of Christians consider nationality as most important identity. <http://pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Nigerias-Presidential-Election-The-Christian-Muslim-Divide.aspx> - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

³ UNFPA state of the world population 2011: People and possibilities in a world of 7 billion, <http://foweb.unfpa.org/SWP2011/reports/EN-SWOP2011-FINAL.pdf> - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

⁴ Twelve states in northern Nigeria have adopted the Islamic Sharia law. The non-criminal aspects of Sharia have been allowed in the Nigerian legal system right from the colonial period. The inclusion of the criminal aspects and the adoption and enforcing of a code of behaviour according to Sharia began in 1999 and triggered increased sectarian violence.

violence by Boko Haram and “clashes”⁵ between Muslims and Christians. While these occurrences of direct violence represent gross violations of human rights, it is equally important to pay attention to all the stages, processes and trends of persecution because they are interrelated. Structural injustices meted out to religious minorities are also appalling, and if unchecked may metamorphose into more lethal forms.

1. Legal framework for religious freedom

Despite the protection of religious liberty rights under international law, “...the violations of religious freedom worldwide are massive, widespread, and in many parts of the world intensifying” (Marshall 2008:11). The situation in Nigeria today mirrors this worldwide disjuncture, common to countries where religious minority rights are violated between legal provisions and realities. The country has acceded to various international legal instruments for the protection of religious freedom at the United Nations and regional levels. Section 38 of the Constitution of Nigeria, which echoes Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 8 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, states that:

(1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance. (2) No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or religion not approved by his parent or guardian. (3) No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination. [...] (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, section 38).

This provision clearly guarantees the rights to freedom of religion of both the individual and his or her religious community. Section 10 of the Constitution was intended to provide a safeguard against turning the country into a theocracy. It states that, “The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.” Notwithstanding the unambiguity of the text, it became a source of conflict in 1999 when the then Governor of Zamfara State was to introduce Sharia

⁵ Sometimes the term “clash” has been inappropriately employed by the international news media to describe one-sided violence against Christians.

in his state, and in the following year Muslims in other northern states demanded the implementation of the Islamic legal code. Christians opposed the move by complaining that it would infringe on their rights. Muslims who were pro-Sharia insisted that the adoption of Sharia does not amount to adopting a state religion. This led to confrontation and bloodshed. Twelve states adopted the Sharia in flagrant disregard of the appeal by the then President, Olusegun Obasanjo, to revert to status quo ante. This development shows that constitutional provisions might camouflage the actual reality of the state of religious freedom, or its weakness could be exploited by religious bigots and mischiefmakers in the country. In a recent ranking of countries' Religious Freedom Indexes, Nigeria has witnessed a jump in several dimensions of the violation of religious liberty rights. Government Regulation Index: 4.5 (West African average: 1.4), Social Regulation Index: 5.4 (West African average: 2.4), Government Favouritism Index: 7.2 (West African average: 3.5), and Religious Persecution Index: 6 (ARDA).⁶ These data only give the overall picture without reflecting the strong local and regional variations.

2. Subnational diversity

Before we highlight the discrepancy in the above data it would be worthwhile to correct a myth about the demographic composition of the north and south. Often, Nigeria is described as comprising a Muslim north and a Christian south; this oversimplification buries the demographic characteristics of the Nigerian population and limits one's understanding of the nature of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in the country. It is helpful to note that there are millions of Christians and Muslims in northern and southern Nigeria. Indigenous Christians abound in large numbers in all the northern states. In at least seven out of the 19 northern states Christians are the majority. North-western and north-eastern regions have the largest concentration of Muslims. The north-central, which is also referred to as the Middle Belt, is considerably mixed with a Christian majority. Indigenous Muslims are in large numbers in south-western states and are a small minority in the south-south. Adherents of African traditional religions can be found all over the country. Some people are syncretistic. They blend Christianity or Islam with African traditional religion or sorcery. Another important demographic characteristic of the Nigerian population is that most ethnic groups as a whole belong predominantly to particular religions. For

⁶ Association of Religion Data Archives combines data from various official and independent sources, including those of the US State Department's International Religious Freedom reports (0-10, low is less persecution). www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_166_3.asp - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

example the Hausa and the Fulani, considered together as the largest ethnic group⁷, are predominantly Muslims.

Judging by incidents of religious violence, southern Nigeria shows more religious accommodation. For example, in the south-west, Christians, Muslims and traditional worshippers live together in relative harmony. They continue to inter-marry and allow children to decide to follow the faith of either parent. People are not killed because someone has made a blasphemous statement or drew a defaming cartoon, whether the culprit lives in Nigeria or in a different hemisphere. No one has been killed or maimed for America's war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. A Muslim can be elected as a governor in a state where Christians are the overwhelming majority. The people of the south-west are both very religious and open-minded. The more charismatic and Pentecostal churches as well as African independent churches have their stronghold there. There are also devout Muslims and Islamic scholars in this region. The southern parts of the country which are not as mixed as the south-west also exhibit higher levels of religious tolerance than the north. Muslims from the northern parts of the country who live in the south-east and south-south do complain of marginalisation, but violent hostilities are rare.

The northern regions of Nigeria have become the hotbeds of religious extremism. Religious sensitivity is very high in these parts of the country. As mentioned in the introduction, thousands of lives have been lost since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999. What accounts for the differences in orientation to religious freedom between the southern and northern regions? This is a question that has engaged many scholars. For example, Turaki (2010) argues that what accounts for the distinctive and less tolerant nature of Islam in northern Nigeria are: the grim legacy of Islamic colonialism and slavery in northern Nigeria advanced through the Usman dan Fodio Jihad of 1804-1808, the British amalgamation of the country and, putting the large northern areas under a system of so-called Indirect Rule administered by mainly the Caliphate or Muslim emirates, whereas in southern Nigeria, the British adopted a system of Direct Rule. These phenomena engendered a domination-subordination relationship between Muslims and non-Muslim groups in northern Nigeria in pre-colonial and colonial times. Christianity spread in the south while Islam, which had come to northern Nigeria before the advent of Christian missionaries in the south, was allowed to flourish during the colonial period. Christian missionaries were even restricted by the British colonial administration from taking the gospel to Muslims in the north. As a result, Christian missionary activities were more concentrated in the south.

⁷ The Hausa and Fulani are separate ethnic groups but are often considered as one group referred to as Hausa-Fulani.

3. Typologies persecution of Christian in Nigeria

As mentioned earlier, the news of periodic clashes between Christians and Muslims in central Nigeria has tended to shroud the endemic persecutions that many Christians, especially in northern Nigeria, have grown up with and live with from the rest of the world. This is because the systemic and structural injustices that many Christians face and the direct violence meted out to some individual Christians in different parts of the north have failed to appeal to the news media. Therefore, in the following section the gamut of violations of the rights of freedom of religion of Christians in Nigeria are discussed.

3.1 Structural injustice

Even before the adoption of Sharia by some Muslim dominated states in the north, Christian minorities in those states had been living under extremely difficult situations. Political marginalisation and discrimination of Christians are the order of the day in these states. Christians who venture into politics in such Muslim dominated states are harassed and intimidated. Muslims who appear to be unbiased and accommodating of non-Muslims are blackmailed or depicted as “Christians” during electioneering campaigns. For example, there were Muslim politicians that were called names such as “pastor”, “bishop”, “John”, etcetera for their ability to reach out to the Christian electorates.⁸ The challenge facing Christians in the political arena is not only confined to northern states but even to politics at the centre.

As noted by Sanusi (2004: 80), some Muslims in northern Nigeria were inspired by the Iranian Revolution: “With the Iranian Revolution came a radicalisation of Muslim politics in northern Nigeria. The first group that could be labelled ‘fundamentalist’ was the ‘Muslim Brothers’, led by Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, an economics student at Ahmadu Bello University and a former secretary-general of the Muslim Students Society (MSS) of that university. Fired by the success of the Iranian people, many undergraduates joined Zakzaky in his struggle for an Islamic State in Nigeria, to be constructed on the ashes of the existing state, which was built on ‘ignorance’ or *jabiliyya* (a term used in reference to pre-Islamic Arab society).” A foremost Nigerian Muslim cleric, late Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, a recipient of the prestigious King Faisal International Award from Saudi Arabia, publicly called on Muslims not

⁸ For example, the governor of Kaduna State between 1999-2007, Alhaji Ahmed Makarfi, a Muslim, was nicknamed “Pastor Makarfi” and “John Makarfi” for his hesitation to cave in to the demand of the Muslim population to implement a full Sharia, and for his ability to reach out to Christians in the state as well as his support for Olusegun Obasanjo’s presidential bid. See the report: Human Rights Watch, *The Miss World riots: Continued impunity for killing in Kaduna*, 23 July 2003, A1513, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3f4f594b0.html> – Retrieved 29 March 2012.

to ever allow non-Muslims to ascend to political positions in Nigeria (Alao 2009 and International Crisis Group 2010).

The religious bigotry and intrigues that have always ensued in Nigerian politics manifested themselves in the last general elections in April 2011 resulting in wanton loss of lives and property.⁹ As the early results of the presidential election showed that Goodluck Jonathan was leading, Islamists went on the rampage attacking churches, Christians and Muslims they perceived to have supported him. In Kaduna State, tension grew when the Muslim Governor was elevated to the Vice-Presidency of the country after the death of President Umaru Musa Yar'adua in 2010, and the then Christian Deputy Governor constitutionally became the Governor. Even though the Muslim Governor was appointed as the Vice-President of Nigeria, Islamists didn't want a Christian to become the governor in Kaduna State. Against their wish he became the Governor and went ahead later to win a term through a highly polarised election in 2011. There are people who share the belief that the reigns of violence in the country now are a protest by those who are opposed to Jonathan's rise to power.¹⁰

The adoption of Sharia by 12 northern states has increased the challenges faced by Christian minorities in those states. Christians' access to state-owned media decreased considerably, in some instances to just 30 minutes in a week. Ascendency of Christians to key positions in public services is greatly impaired by the discriminatory practices. Recruitments into the public services are influenced by religious and ethnic considerations. Christian youths seeking admission into higher institutions of learning often have a hard time getting a place, and when offered admission, they might be enrolled into programmes other than those of their choice. Getting land to build a church is another perennial problem confronting Christians in Muslim dominated states. When Christians are able to acquire land it is difficult to get the necessary building approval or the so-called Certificate of Occupancy. In most of the Sharia states, a majority of Christians prefer to live close to the military and police barracks where their lifestyles are less threatened, and in the event of any attack by Muslim extremists they can easily take refuge in the barracks.

3.2 Spontaneous mob violence in reaction to perceived "provocation"

Christians in northern Nigeria are occasionally subjected to mob attacks by Islamists due to perceived "provocation". Many incidents of, such as the cartoon of

⁹ Human Rights Watch estimated the death toll to be over 800 concerning the election related violence alone: www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800 - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

¹⁰ The News, "Wole Soyinka: Next phase of Boko Haram terrorism", 6 February 2012. <http://thenewsafica.com/2012/02/06/next-phase-of-boko-haram-terrorism> - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

Prophet Mohammed published in Denmark, the American invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11, and numerous local episodes like a newspaper commentary during the 2002 Miss World beauty pageant by Isioma Daniel who suggested that if the Prophet Mohammed were alive he would have admired the contestants, and may even wish to have one of the beauty queens as a wife, triggered mob violence against Christians. Events that are not even remotely associated with Christians have led to vicarious attacks on Christians in Nigeria. Since this has been a recurring experience one expects the government to take early warning seriously, but that is not always the case. The reaction of government after such attacks is to dismiss them as carried out by hoodlums, and promising to bring the perpetrators to justice, which has almost never happened.

3.3 Covert night raids

This 'guerrilla' strategy emerged in 2010. Christian villages in Plateau, Kaduna and Bauchi States around Jos, Zangon Kataf and Tafawa Balewa respectively have come under covert night attacks by yet to be identified assailants. The attackers invade villages, kill, maim and set houses ablaze when the victims are asleep; women and children are not spared. These are well-coordinated attacks that exploit the spatial vulnerability of the targeted Christian farming communities in the aforementioned states (Rothfuss and Joseph 2010). The government has not been able to apprehend and halt these dastardly acts; the communities are setting up neighbourhood watch groups to guard their homes. When such attacks were frequent around Jos the villagers were sending women and children to sleep in open fields to avoid being caught in their homes in the covert night raids. Around September last year, many children from such villages were developing illnesses related to exposure to harsh weather during the rainy season.

3.4 Boko Haram Islamic insurgency

The Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, known by its sobriquet as Boko Haram, has been launching a shadowy campaign of terror against the Nigerian State and people. Boko Haram means "Western education is a sin" in Hausa language. The group is opposed to Western values and democracy. In recent times, the group has targeted the military, police, Christians and fellow Muslims, including an attack on the United Nations building in Abuja. The group issued an ultimatum to southerners and even native Christians to leave northern Nigeria, and have stepped up their attacks against churches. Boko Haram is seeking wider and strict application of Sharia in northern Nigeria, and recently declared war on Christians in what the

sect spokesperson described as their bid to islamise Nigeria.¹¹ The group began as a radical Islamic movement about 15 years ago, and became increasingly militant. In 2009, they clashed with government security forces, leading to the extra-judicial killing of their founder Mallam Mohammed Yusuf and many of their members.

Many innocent civilians were killed during the bloody clash between the group and the security forces. Scores of Christians were killed and several churches were burnt. The group demanded that their Christian victims denounce Christ and convert to Islam or be killed. In recent times, the group has resorted to bombing and shooting people in churches. Just to give an example, on Christmas day, the St. Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla was bombed, 44 people were killed, 127 injured, and 7 went blind.¹² On the same day, some churches in Jos and Potiskum were also targeted.

Another tragedy of the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency is the internal displacement of many indigenous Christians of Yobe State in north-eastern Nigeria. On 4 November Boko Haram stormed the Yobe State capital, Damaturu and attacked security posts and then went to the predominantly Christian settlement of the city, bombed churches, shot people, and destroyed Christian shops. Any person that could not recite the Muslim creed was killed. A majority of the over 150 people killed that day were Christians.¹³ In the following weeks the attacks against churches and Christians intensified and spread to other towns like Potiskum and Geidam, forcing many Christians, including those that are indigenous to flee to other states, and those who were not able to leave took refuge in two Christian enclaves, Gadaka and Kukar Gadu.¹⁴ Gadaka was later not spared from attack. Several of the people that fled relocated to Umuasha in Toto Local Government Area of Nassarawa State, New Karu in Abuja, Jos in Plateau State, and several other states. Many of the internally displaced persons have complained that their homes have been looted, those who are civil servants are afraid to go back to their homes, and the State Government instead of being mindful of their plight went ahead to conduct verification of workers, presumably to take action against those who are not in office. As many churches have been burnt or closed down as a result of the persecution, the clergy are the most severely affected. It is common church architecture in Nigeria to have

¹¹ "We're planning a ,war' on Christians - Boko Haram Spokesman", 4 March 2012; <http://tinyurl.com/LSNG2012>; Source: www.leadership.ng - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

¹² Madalla is a town in Niger State near Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory; Nigerian Tribune newspaper, "Madalla bomb blast: 7 parishioners go blind", 22 February 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/NGTN2012>; Source: <http://tribune.com.ng> - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

¹³ See Vanguard, 12 November 2011, "Yobe bombings: 'My friends were killed before my eyes'".

¹⁴ See account of the Chairman of the Yobe State Chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Rev. Garba Idi in an interview with the *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper on 7 February 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/NG-Idi>; Source: <http://tribune.com.ng> - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

the pastor's house in the same compound with the church, making the pastors and their families the first targets during attacks. Hence, many pastors and their families have been affected, and some church headquarters have failed to provide support to such pastors and their families.¹⁵

4. Responses to Nigerian persecution of Christians

As Christians and their places of worship have become increasingly vulnerable to attacks, a number of security measures have been adopted by the churches. Security around church buildings has been intensified: Churches are acquiring hand-held metal detectors to screen people; in some churches women are barred from entering with handbags; cars are parked in designated areas, and roadblocks are mounted around some churches to restrict access. Even with such tight security, a suicide bomber forced himself into the gates of the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) headquarters' church on Sunday, 26 February 2012.

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

Many Christians interpret what is happening as signs of the end times, and therefore accept it as a price to pay for being followers of Christ. Others believe that Christians must rise up physically against the relentless assault on their religious freedom. Disappointed with the peaceful disposition of the church in general, in the face of apparent state failure to prevent these attacks, some people are reverting to traditional religious practices to seek security and have the inspiration to fight back. Unfortunately, the actions of this last category of individuals taint the image of the church, especially when the church fails to come out and dissociate itself from them. The issue of cannibalism, a reversion to barbaric practices, during the 29 September 2011 violence in Jos, was an appalling development. We found in the course of our fieldwork that religious leaders of the different denominations did not feel obliged to issue a statement condemning it; instead they expected the Christian Association of Nigeria to do so. Clearly, the church stands to gain by condemning such actions that misrepresent its theological position.

Recently, the suicide bomb attack on the COCIN Headquarters' Church in Jos also became a double tragedy. A church member was reported to have been lynched by

¹⁵ Interview with some displaced indigenous Christians of Yobe State in late 2011 and early 2012.

an angry mob of youths of the church as he was mistaken for one of the suicide bombers.¹⁶ Two weeks later, St. Finbas Catholic Church Rayfield, Jos was attacked by a suicide bomber. Christian youths in the area attacked some Muslims in the nearby Mai Adiko. Worried by this development, some leading Pentecostal pastors issued a statement, under the auspices of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), saying they do not support any form of revenge against Muslims, more so that the reprisals always end up targeting innocent people.¹⁷

While the present situation has made the tense relations between Christians and Muslims even worse, initiatives aimed at promoting inter-faith dialogue have been sustained by the efforts of the leadership of both religions. The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC)¹⁸ and its state and local government equivalents, and numerous inter-faith initiatives have continued to serve as important platforms for Christians and Muslims to work together to seek ways to improve mutual understanding and tolerance. However, the inability of these efforts to make significant positive impacts at this crucial time underscores the need to evaluate the approaches to inter-faith dialogue with a view to making it more meaningful and productive.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

It appears that this time around Nigerian brinkmanship is being stretched to its limits by the latest upsurge in sectarian violence in the country. As events of recent months have shown, it will only take a combination of efforts and strategies to address the underlying causes of sectarian violence in the country. While security efforts can help to deal with civil disorder, long-term solution would have to hinge on social justice. It is important to acknowledge that government cannot do it alone. Nigerians, state and non-state actors, must come together and engage in a frank dialogue to find a society-wide solution to recurring religious conflicts. The goal of such national dialogue is to chart a future where citizens from different ethnic, religious and geographical backgrounds can live in peace with one another.

The call for a Sovereign National Conference seems to be gaining momentum. A group which called itself National Coalition of Progressive Forces (also known as The Patriots) has issued a statement that it would send a bill for the convocation of a national conference to the National Assembly. Most of the latest calls acknowledge that the country is on the brink and that there is a need to make sure that it does

¹⁶ "The Jos blast: Church member mistaken for suicide bomber, lynched" 3 March 2012; <http://tinyurl.com/FGRD2012>; Source: www.vanguardngr.com - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

¹⁷ "Boko Haram: Pastors Adeboye, Oritsejafor, Oyedepo, Adeyemi, Adefarasin, others go for prayers", 18 March 2012; <http://tinyurl.com/NGPR2012>; Source: www.vanguardngr.com - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

¹⁸ www.nirecng.org - Retrieved 25 March 2012.

not fall off.¹⁹ Various groups calling for the conference are reaffirming their commitment to the unity of the country, and are only asking for a political restructuring and discussion about issues, such as ethno-religious conflicts, threatening the existence of the country. This perhaps would convince some of those who have been opposed to the conference, by pointing to other countries that have split and which are plagued with crises, to sign on to the idea for a national dialogue. There appears to be no viable alternative to convening such a conference.

The failure of inter-religious dialogue, led by Christian and Muslim leaders, to tame the persistent tension between the two main religions in the country needs to be investigated. Since such a dialogue remains a viable option an interrogation of those factors that render it ineffective is required. One obvious factor that has affected the ability of leaders of the two religions to come together in the face of the renewed attacks by the Islamist sect Boko Haram is mutual distrust. This attitude has contributed more to finger-pointing, blaming and attribution instead of reflexive reframing of the conflicts in terms of common concerns and aspirations (cf. Rothman 1997). On both sides, there are many who share the vision of living in peace with one another. This can be encouraged if the two religions work to discard stereotypes against each other. By doing so, the clamour for greater religious freedom is likely to become a joint project for adherents of both religions and other citizens who embrace the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

The international community should be concerned about the precarious situation because it can be unsettling to the region and potentially even beyond. The persistent inter-religious violence in northern Nigeria has to be seen as an early warning, not only for the national government, but also for the international community. It is a matter of fact that the national security forces are not capable of solving the problem of growing inter-religious and inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria alone. This leads to a situation where impunity fosters violence on both sides of the main conflict parties, an ideal breeding ground for a civil war in the most populous and still swiftly growing country of Africa. Taking into consideration the geographical complexity and vastness of the country, only intensive and long-term development cooperation, including the training of police and military forces, can help to strengthen the state's capability to prevent a further increase of violence. In addition, the international community needs to support Nigeria to build the capacity to deal with intransigent forces and address underlying factors driving the conflict.

¹⁹ Peoples Daily, "The Patriots plan to storm NASS over SNC", 25 March 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/PD-NASS>; Source: www.peoplesdaily-online.com – Retrieved 26 March 2012.

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