



## Religions and Development Research Programme

### Religion, politics and governance in Nigeria

#### Introduction

Religion has always played an important part in Nigerian politics, although many disagreements were suppressed during decades of centralized military rule. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, religion has become increasingly important in both public debate and political mobilization. Nigeria has successfully managed to contain religious violence in central (Federal) politics, through accommodative arrangements that provide for the equitable representation of the country's largest groups, Christians and Muslims. However, such strategies have either not been instituted or have been unsuccessful at lower tiers of governance and in many Nigerian States, diverse Muslim, Christian and other groups see each other mainly as competitors.

Factors contributing to the political mobilization and participation of religious groups are identified through research focusing on the three States of Anambra, Kano and Oyo. These States are located in the East, North and West of the country respectively and have different religious and ethno-regional compositions and historical experiences.

Many religious groups make significant contributions to human development, through the provision of education, health and social welfare, mainly for their numerous members all over the country. Beyond the similarity of their social contributions, many religious groups share ideals and virtues, and many religious leaders also share a critique of the Nigerian state and its political class. However, many leaders of different religious groups appear to be unaware of their shared views and interests

because they have few opportunities to engage with each other. Moreover, while some are co-opted by individual politicians and governments in their attempts to increase grassroots support and legitimacy, others are excluded from access to state institutions. The excluded groups are often already disadvantaged because of their minority status or their association with 'non-indigenes' (internal migrants), who are often refused full political representation outside the State in which they are 'indigenous'. Faced with the close relationships between some religions and state bodies, the exclusion of local religious minorities increases their feelings of marginalization and fear.

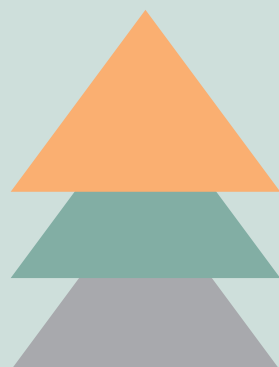
Nevertheless, formal and informal spaces for inter-religious encounters do already exist at both national and local levels, and religious and civil society organizations collaborate in attempts to deepen democracy and improve state accountability.

The findings of this research suggest that religious groups could be important participants in a national dialogue about the country's future. However, if they are to act together, discrimination against non-indigenous and minority religious groups must be tackled: all religious groups must be given the possibility to engage with the state – and each other – on an equal footing. In addition, the effectiveness of existing forums for inter-religious dialogue needs to be assessed and new forums established at State and local levels, to encourage inter-religious dialogue and provide a platform for religious groups to engage with State actors on common concerns.

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In order to reduce religious competition and conflict at the State level in Nigerian politics, research suggests that:

- Discrimination against minority and non-indigene groups in State politics and policy must be discouraged
- Deterrents to preferential treatment of religious organizations by politicians seeking support and legitimacy are needed
- A better understanding of the characteristics, achievements and limitations of the networks and collaborations that bring together different religious groups is needed, to assess the potential for encouraging them as channels of dialogue between religions and between religions and the state.
- In particular, inter-religious institutions are needed at State level to provide a forum for dialogue between religious groups and a base from which they can interact with government institutions.



## Background

Religion has become increasingly important in Nigerian politics because of the political liberalization associated with the return to civilian rule in 1999 and the degree of autonomy accorded to State governments in a federal system. At the central level, the rise of religion associated with the introduction of *shari'a* law in twelve northern Nigerian states since 1999, has led to a broad debate about the country's constitution, which guarantees religious freedom and prohibits the adoption of a state religion. Attempts to give Muslims and Christians equal symbolic representation in the state include the equitable treatment of Christians and Muslims in most federal appointments, as well as the creation in 2000 of the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), comprised of 25 prominent representatives of both major religious communities, as a space for inter-religious dialogue and state-religion interaction.

Although religious difference has been managed relatively well at the federal level, religious rivalry has often played an important role in conflict and violence at the State and local levels. Violent episodes have mainly reflected rivalry between Islam and Christianity, although there have also been intra-Muslim conflicts. In addition, religious intrigue has affected relationships between Christian denominations and has sometimes involved other groups, such as the relatively small numbers who claim traditional beliefs as their primary religious identity.

In order to better understand the increase in religious competition at the State and local levels, this research focused on identifying the factors that have contributed to the political mobilization and participation of religious groups in the three States of Anambra, Kano and Oyo. These states are located in the East, North and West of the country respectively; they have different religious and ethno-regional compositions; and they have had different historical experiences. Through a review of relevant documents and semi-structured interviews with representatives of religious groups, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and government officials in each State, the research explored informants' views on state-religion relations, as well as religious views on some key policy issues.

## Key findings

The three State-level case studies show that relationships between the state and Muslim and Christian organizations are frequently ambiguous: both world religions provide moral frameworks for people and both have groups and organizations that articulate their demands, but they also critique the state and challenge state institutions.

The Muslim critique of secular law has led to the introduction of *shari'a* penal law in twelve States, while Christian demands for a re-privatization of former mission schools currently under State control might reinforce Muslim disadvantage in education. Muslims' freedom to practise Islam, including *shari'a* law, in their view permits the introduction of *shari'a* at State level. Many Christians, in contrast, focus on the provision that no state religion be adopted and feel that the introduction of *shari'a* law is unconstitutional because it affects their religious freedom to live without *shari'a*.

The ability of religious communities to participate in politics and governance in Nigerian States is strongly related both to their position as a local majority or minority religion and to their association with indigenes or non-indigenes in the State in question. The nature of power and discrimination are often determined by local circumstances, especially a State's religious, ethnic and native/in-migrant mix (see Box 1).

### Box 1: Religious discrimination against minorities and non-indigenes in Kano and Oyo States

In the predominantly Muslim Kano State in northern Nigeria, Christian organizations are systematically disadvantaged by the State government. They are refused tax-exempt status, and are often prevented from building churches, organizing public events and accessing radio and TV channels to commission broadcasts. While some Christians in Kano State are indigenes, most hail from the south of Nigeria. In contrast, non-indigenous Muslims reported that their access to politics had improved since the introduction of *shari'a* law, with some even holding office.

In the mixed Christian-Muslim Oyo State, *local* Muslims and Christians work closely together in all the major political parties, state institutions and offices. However in practice, non-indigenes are excluded from holding public office. Muslims from northern Nigeria do not even patronize the State government's Independent *Shari'a* Arbitration Panel, instead setting up independent *shari'a* panels.

As a result, and given the close links between ethnicity and religion, religious competition is interwoven with the other rivalries that dominate Nigerian local politics. This means that relationships between the state and religious organizations are inequitable: in all the States studied, some groups and organizations have good access to State institutions, while others are excluded from participation in local politics. Conflicts over religious participation in politics are closely tied up with disputes over access to material and ideological resources, from access to land to control over the State budget and local radio and television channels.

Interviews with religious leaders and government representatives showed that State governments primarily view religious organizations as political mobilizing agents. As a result, State institutions often attempt to co-opt specific religious groups and FBOs for political purposes, rather than providing support for their development activities. Often, such co-optation takes place through political appointments or through strategic donations to influential religious groups. However, while many religious groups seek close relations with government, others fear its corrupting influence (see Box 2).

## Box 2: Opposition to political co-optation in Anambra

In Anambra State, donations to religious organizations are entrenched as part of the state's patronage politics: politicians seek to win the endorsement of religious groups through generous gifts, sometimes at the expense of other political commitments. However, this strategy has also backfired: when the Anambra State Governor Dr Chinwoke Mbadinuju (1999-2003) donated 2 million Naira (at the time approximately £8,000 or \$13,500) to the Catholic Church, the money was returned to him with the suggestion that he should pay the salary arrears of the State government's workers instead.

All the State governments studied work with some religious organizations, thereby creating spaces in which members of different religious groups can interact. However, the uneven relations between the state and religious groups, which are characterized by the exclusion of some groups and the preferential treatment and co-optation of others, contribute to mistrust between groups. The resulting fears about religious or other identity-based forms of exclusion may be contributing to deepening social divisions. Nevertheless, in some instances the inclusion of religious groups in State institutions or processes has contributed to increased understanding between them and the government. In addition, the creation of some spaces for inter-religious negotiation means that some religious groups have been able to enter into a dialogue with each other, as well as with the state. In practice, there is much day-to-day interaction between religious groups, leading to emulation of some

## Box 3: Everyday inter-religious engagement in Oyo State and innovations

In many parts of Nigeria, the rise of Pentecostal Christianity has been perceived as a threat to Muslims: it was feared that young Muslims, especially those with education, would convert to these churches both to participate in their prayer-led services and to gain access to the private universities that they have established. In response to this threat, some State governments placed restrictions on public Christian events and some Muslim groups forbade their members to participate in such events, thereby deepening existing divisions. In contrast, Muslims in religiously mixed southwest Nigeria, who interact with Christians on a daily basis, founded an organization that acknowledged the expectations of urban and educated young people. The highly successful Nasrul-Lahi-Il-Fatih Society of Nigeria (NASFAT), founded in 1995, not only offers a unique Muslim form of prayer-led worship, it is also currently building a private university. Other Muslim groups in southwest Nigeria and beyond have also begun to invest in religiously provided private tertiary education.

Forums and spaces for mutual encounter are important, because representatives from different religious backgrounds share many concerns about the Nigerian state. All the respondents in the research commented, almost despairingly, on Nigeria's increasing poverty. They appear to agree on a vision of development that prioritizes infrastructural development, service delivery and good governance. Many Muslims and Christians referred to the Qur'an or Bible to explain why, in their view, the government has a responsibility to better the life chances of its people.

## Conclusions

- Religious Nigerians from different parts of the country share similar views on good governance and development. These are shaped by recourse to Biblical and Qur'anic ideals of justice, equality and 'the fear of God'. They emphasize the importance of infrastructural development, education and health care for all Nigerians.
- Many religious groups make efforts to provide their members with access to education and other services. Sometimes their services and facilities are open to members of other religious groups.
- State governments do not systematically support independent development efforts by religious groups. Instead, according to most informants, they attempt to co-opt religious groups in order to gain grassroots support and legitimacy.
- Reflecting their unequal and insecure access to State governments, religious organizations tend to see each other as political rivals, despite their shared views on government failure to provide education and health-related infrastructure, and despite their shared engagement in the provision of basic services.
- While encounters between the state and religious groups have facilitated negotiation and dialogue, the potential for improving mutual understanding and cooperation is undermined by the unequal integration of religious groups and FBOs into politics.
- Because excluded religious groups are often linked to minorities and non-natives in a particular state, who are already experiencing discrimination in other ways, conflict and violence can occur, and religious rivalry often reinforces rivalry between different groups at the State and local levels.

## Policy implications

- Many religious groups are united by their critique of the failure of the Nigerian Federal and State governments to deliver welfare to citizens. This suggests that they could be important participants in a national dialogue about the country's future.
- Attempts to reduce religious conflict must address concerns over unequal treatment and the fear of marginalization felt by many religious organizations, often arising from favourable treatment for indigenous and majority groups. For rivalry between different religious groups at State and local levels to be reduced, non-indigene and migrant groups must be able to participate in democratic politics and benefit equally from development policies.
- Politicians' efforts to co-opt and give preferential treatment to religious organizations fuels the politicization of religion and should be discouraged by, for example, discouraging, or placing a ceiling on, private and public donations to individual religious organizations by members of State and local governments.
- Institutional spaces that provide opportunities for creative engagement both between the state and religious groups and between different religious groups appear to increase Muslim-Christian understanding and co-operation. There is a need to understand the achievements and limitations of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) at the federal level, and to assess whether it might provide a useful model for inter-religious councils in each State.
- Formal and informal spaces for inter-religious encounters already exist at both national and local levels (e.g. professional associations, local development associations, Youth Corpers). In addition, religious and civil society organizations collaborate in attempts to deepen democracy and improve state accountability. A better understanding of the characteristics, achievements and limitations of these networks and collaborations is needed, to assess the potential for promoting and encouraging them as channels of dialogue between religions and between religions and the state.

## UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM Further information

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See also Paden, John (2008) *Faith and Politics in Nigeria*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

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