

## **USCIRF Hearing Presentation**

The Chair of the Commission,

Honorable Commissioners,

Distinguished Members

I thank you for the privilege of making this presentation on Religion and Politics in Nigeria towards 2023 General Elections.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religion society with over 250 ethnicities and many religions. However, Christianity and Islam are the dominant religions across the country, but there are many adherents of traditional religions who are mostly in the minorities and scattered across the country. Traditionally, all religious adherents had lived peacefully and interacted based on tolerance and understanding of their differences in the pre-colonial societies. Islamic religion has been co-existing with traditional religions for centuries in most part of Nigeria before Christianity came and took root around 18<sup>th</sup> century. There is nowhere in the history books that any of the religious adherents were in friction, even when the colonialists arrived with their biases for Christianity. While the foreign religions were proselytizing to expand their influences, traditional religionists were recorded to be accommodating, upholding the ethics of sanctity of lives and social obligation of peaceful co-existence with neighbors.

In order to sustain the peaceful co-existence among the various religions, the independent and post-independent constitutions of Nigeria enunciated that the country should be a secular state with none of the religions taking precedence or favored over the others by the government. In essence, there should be no state religion and state affairs should be separated from religion. This principle was sustained by subsequent governments and even the various military administrations that ruled strictly separated the state from religions.

To some extent, the religious distribution pattern of the Nigerian population follows roughly the patterns of ethnicities. Islamic religion is more prevalent in the Northern part of the country, especially among the Hausa-Fulani ethnicity; but there are minority ethnic groups who are predominantly Christians and traditional religious adherents within the same geographical location. Their cultures were protected for many years by the dominant majority Muslims, who constituted the ruling group in that part of Nigeria. Moving gradually down to the south where minority ethnic groups are much more prevalent, there are mixtures of Islamic and Christian adherents and traditional religious worshippers. The Southwestern part of the country follows this pattern where majority Yoruba ethnicity has an admixture of Islamic and Christian adherents almost in equal numbers, while traditional religion adherents are also prevalent especially in rural communities. The Southern and Eastern part of Nigeria where there are

prevalence of minority groups such as Ijaw, Benin, Itshekiri, Urhobo, Ibibio, etc. and Ibo majority have prevalently Christian religious adherents with Muslims and traditional religious groups in the minorities.

In spite of the wide diversities of the various societies in Nigeria, the peoples of the country lived together for many years into the post-independent period without frictions and violent religious conflicts, even though there were occasional ethnic clashes and a major civil war as a result of political conflicts in the late 1960s. The first violent religious conflict occurred in the 1980s in the Northern part of the country as a result of the activities of some Islamic extremist groups; but they were suppressed by the extant military government. Since then, there were a number of religious riots predominantly in the Northern part, which recorded the loss of many lives and properties, but after each incident, the society would recover and the people would continue to live in affected communities sometimes in fragile situations.

Naturally, the media published reports of religious conflicts and give accounts of their dimensions. However, in the recent years, the activities of the media in terms of insensitive reporting of religious conflicts have been noticed to have aggravated religious violence in Nigeria. In addition, the mixture of politics with religion appears to have complicated the religious complexities and amplifies religious conflicts in the country. Insensitive reporting of religious conflicts has led to spreading of such conflicts to other parts of the country as exemplified by some of the violence that took place in certain parts of Nigeria very recently. An instance of such is the religious violence that took place between the ethnic Yoruba traditional religious worshippers and the migrant Hausa Muslims in Shagamu in 2007. This violent conflict led to reprisal attacks and follow up riots in Kano as a result of inappropriate reporting of the incidents in the mass media, leading to more human casualties and destruction of properties in both locations and elsewhere in the country. This scenario was repeated in several other religious violence which occurred in other parts of Nigeria.

Politicians, in their quest to cultivate support from the electorate, often mobilize the religious sentiments of voters, in the process whipping up negative sentiments among the diverse population. This sometimes leads to antagonism among the diverse religious adherents sometimes leading to violent conflicts among the adherents of dominant religions during political campaign periods. On the part of the media, being the platform for propagating religious messages and political rhetoric to the diverse publics, they sometimes inadvertently report dangerous narratives and rhetoric that further aggravates divisions among the population without sensitivity to the likely consequences among the various religious adherents.

Irresponsible media that amplifies negative religion and political sentiments is seriously threatening the political space and could lead to the stultification of the current democratic

dispensation in Nigeria. By offering platforms for religious entrepreneurs to irrationally speculate religious domination by a section of the population over the other as part of political rhetoric towards the 2023 general election, a serious threat to the success of the 2023 political transition is being bred, which could rupture social relations across the country. Currently, there is a huge media campaign about the religious affiliations of contestants for political offices in the media, rather than emphasizing contestants' competence, experiences, manifestoes and level of commitment to the welfare of the populace. This is a potential danger to the unity and progress of the country and to the survival of democracy as it has thrown up religious agitators who are mobilizing in support of various contestants into political offices, with their intention to profit from the potential chaos this could cause during the forthcoming elections. The danger of this is rife in an environment where poverty and ignorance is very prevalent among the voters and where politics is often compromised by financial inducements by corrupt elements in politics. For example, the religious affiliation of presidential candidates and their running mates in the 2023 elections is currently high on the agenda of media discourses, feeding unnecessarily into public sentiments, rather than the media focusing on antecedents of the contestants and the vision they are bringing into the development processes of the Nigerian society.

As a nation, Nigeria is currently confronting security challenges brought about by the violent activities of terrorists, religious extremists and bandits which coalesce into pervasive poverty that has thrown millions of citizens into living below minimum UN recommended economic standard of existence. Thousands of citizens have been killed and million others have been pushed into living in Internally Displaced Peoples camps and refugee camps in the neighboring countries. If the political situation is allowed to further degenerate, it can aggravate the already degenerated socio-economic situation of the citizens and the country can be pushed beyond the precipice. If allowed to tip over by political and religious violent conflicts, it could lead to serious destabilization of the entire West African region. At the end, the experiences of Lebanon, Afghanistan and other countries that have been devastated by activities of religious extremists and terrorists could be a child's play.

### **Recommendations**

Nigeria is presently at a critical time in its democratic journey. Part of the functions of the mass media is to help in charting the direction for sustainable development through peaceful democratic transition processes. It appears however, that the media in Nigerian have not recognized this critical role and have not performed the role to expectation. The extant government in Nigeria has equally not realized the dire threat posed to national democratic journey by the prevailing political situation where religion is being entrenched into or mixed

with politics. In order to have a peaceful election and political transition in 2023 in Nigeria therefore, the following activities should be carried out before the elections:

1. Massive public enlightenment to sensitize Nigerian public on the dangers that mixture of religion and politics during electioneering campaign and political processes poses to peaceful democratic transition and co-existence among citizens. As a secular state, the public should realize that the state and aspirants to state positions ought not to emphasize one religious belief over the others in political contestations, while political parties should desist from using religious sentiments as points of political campaigns. Nigerian public's focus should rather be on the programs and manifestoes of political parties, while the qualities, credibility and antecedents of candidates for public offices should be emphasized in election considerations. Civil society organizations and public institutions should embark on deliberate grassroots mobilizations to enlighten electorates to resist politicians and religious leaders who attempt to use religious issues for political campaigns towards the forthcoming elections.
2. There is need to undertake urgent newsrooms advocacy, re-training of journalists, editors and media practitioners on diversity and conflict sensitive media reporting of political and religious matters in Nigeria. In the process, leadership of the media should be reminded of their social responsibilities of ensuring peaceful violent-free elections to nurture a sustainable democracy in the country by exhibiting sensitivity to reporting religious and social issues that could rupture social fabrics or cause frictions among the diverse population of Nigeria in view of the secular nature of the state. This endeavor should also include the sensitization of contributors into social media platforms and bloggers on the need to ensure that their contents are not emphasizing volatile and divisive narratives and rhetoric that could incite the populace and lead to violent actions during the forth-coming elections across the country. Even though there is massive campaign to discourage regulation of the social media in Nigeria, users of this platform should be encouraged to exhibit social responsibility in their publications on the platform.
3. Moreover, media editors and reporters should not inadvertently lend their platforms for hate messages, through their commercial transactions. Past experiences have revealed that sometimes when advertisers and media users approach managements of media organizations to purchase media space or airtime for political campaigns, management sometimes does not take sufficient precautions to detect hate contents which may filter through to the audiences. This calls for precautions and appropriate attention to prevent the trend.
4. Through diplomatic channels, the US government should direct the attention of the Nigerian government to the dangers posed to Nigerian democracy by the prevailing

situation whereby religious sentiments are adopted for electioneering campaign towards the 2023 general elections. The Nigerian government should be encouraged to activate mechanisms to discourage amplification of dangerous and volatile narratives and rhetoric in the mass media to prevent violent conflagrations in the political space before, during and after the general elections. It is the responsibility of the government to avoid partisanship in ensuring that political rhetoric are not tainted by hate contents and dangerous messages which could set people against themselves in the quest to gain public supports by politicians and their supporters. Likewise, religious leaders could be sensitized on their role in keeping their religious beliefs outside of political influences for the protection of their followers.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this presentation.

**Olusola O. Isola, Ph.D**

**University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria**