

# A West African Socialist Discusses Sharia in Nigeria: a class analysis

When Bill Clinton visited Nigeria, he snubbed the predominantly Muslim north by dropping from his original itinerary a visit there where the Sharia Law was in the process of being revived. But the Muslim leaders of the North, already apprehensive about Clinton's visit, had organized a massive protest demonstration which took place on the very day the US President stepped on to Nigerian soil on 25 August 2000. Clinton visited Nigeria for purely economic reasons. If therefore he and the advocates of Sharia harbored a mutual distrust, then one may not be wrong to suggest that behind the Sharia façade lingers an economic motive. To understand this possibility better a brief history of Northern Nigeria is necessary.

## **Fulani theocracy**

Islam was introduced into the area now occupied by Niger, Chad and Northern Nigeria by Arab traders from North Africa and by the 11th century many of the rulers there, who were mostly Hausa, had been converted to Islam though their subjects still mostly adhered to their African traditional religions. It was not until the beginning of the 19th century that a Fulani Muslim scholar decided to launch a jihad on the people, accusing them of being "pagans" or, in the case of the rulers, of not practicing Islam in the true sense of the word.

He succeeded in overthrowing the Hausa leaders and put his tribesmen as leaders of the Hausa city-states. With Sokoto in present day North-Nigeria as headquarters the Fulani Empire spread its tentacles southwards and by the close of the 19th century had touched Yorubaland down south. Having established themselves as the new rulers in the region, the top brass of the Muslim Fulani naturally controlled commerce, trade routes, agriculture and thus became not only the political leaders but more importantly they held economic power. As commerce and industry flourished these sultans, emirs and sardanas set up courts where they tried cases according to the Sharia.

Many writers refer to the action of Dan Fodio and his generals as more of a Fulani revolt against the Hausa rulers than an Islamic Jihad. Whatever the case, the ordinary Fulani like the ordinary Hausa still lived in poverty while the new ruling classes enjoyed the same privileges as the old Hausa lords did.

## **Enter Britain**

The political and economic dominance of the new Muslim Fulani was however interrupted by the coming on to

the scene of the British colonialists. The mid-nineteenth century saw the gradual annexation of city-states not only in the south but also in the north. Several Muslim states had been taken over by the British partly through signing of treaties and partly by force. Though the then governor of Nigeria, Lord Lugard, ran the country through the "indirect rule" system, the powers of the Fulani oligarchy were considerably eroded. The taxes and rent they hitherto monopolized were now to be passed on to the colonial administration in Lagos. Their authority also shrank as clerks and other administrative officials were appointed by the governor to assist in running the states. All important decisions were made by the British governor, leaving the sultans and emirs with the less rewarding duty of implementing them. They thus lost considerable authority over their subjects.

With the attainment of independence in 1960 and an increased influx of western lifestyles, ideas and secularism the importance of these Muslim Leaders further plummeted. A new category of privileged groups emerged in the form of top civil servants, lawyers and businessmen, some of them even attained through their economic power a higher social status than the traditional rulers. Thus having lost almost all the authority and power vested in them by the Jihad the Muslim Fulani rulers were getting frustrated at the new disadvantaged economic sidelines they were being relegated to.

## **Why new sharia?**

It must be made clear that sharia did exist in Northern Nigeria for a very long time in the "cadi" or "alkali" courts. However they only handled cases relating to family matters like divorce, inheritance, adoption, etc. The current one has attracted a lot of attention because it seeks to go further to include flogging, stoning, amputation, beheading, etc. So the question now is who is behind it and why. All reports coming from the ten states involved in the confusion claim that it is the Muslim masses who are clamoring for sharia. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The decision-making process in place in Nigeria, and in fact all over the world today, effectively excludes the masses. All decisions are taken by the few in high positions. Every legislative body is peopled with the rich or their representatives who enact laws meant to control the poor more.

In the case of sharia in Northern Nigeria, it is heavyweights like Alhaji Shehu Shageri (former president of the federal republic of Nigeria), Alhaji Ahmed Sani Yarima (governor of Zamfara state) Alhaji Ebrahim al Zakzaky (leader of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood) who make

decisions and then call on the people to support them. In fact when last year President Olusegun Obasanjo called a meeting of the Council of State to discuss sharia, Shagari not only refused to attend but also said the Council had no right to take any decision on sharia.. Alhaji Ahmed Sani Yarima, for his part, said Zamfara would not comply with the Council of State's decision that sharia be suspended. These examples show clearly that the masses do not take any decisions.

This Islamic revival sweeping across Northern Nigeria in the form of sharia is in reality the determined efforts of the Muslim Fulani overlords to regain their damagingly eroded power and authority and consequently their sources of wealth, coupled with the desire of the Muslim Hausa elite and businessmen to further their economic interests. This unholy alliance of the fendal Fulani and nouveau-rich Haus came to be known as the Muslim Hausa Fulani. Their imposition of the sharia on the people signifies the ongoing class war of the ruling classes which, as is always the case, pits the unsuspecting masses against each other. It is therefore not surprising that in Zamfara state (the first to go sharia) whereas the two cinema palaces in Gusau (the capital) are closed down, the wealthy few are allowed to keep their satellite dishes and VCRs. Also, since the start of the sharia nonsense in those Northern states, only the poor have fallen victim to the penal code and the various clashes. The originators and their families remain safe whilst the poor masses are used as cannon fodder in a matter that they (the masses) have nothing to gain from – nay, in a matter that is very detrimental to them.

It is not by accident therefore that whereas the ordinary Muslims and Christians and Northerners and Easterners and Westerners are busy killing and maiming each other their Muslim, Christian, northern, eastern and western wealthy leaders are hidden away in cosy mansions, jointly forming and owning political parties for the ordinary Muslim Christians northerners, easterners and westerns to vote for come election day. This is real class war.

Another economic dimension which adds some weight to the desire to implement sharia relates to the oil-rich sheikhdoms of the Gulf region. These countries have set up numerous organizations that generously disburse funds to Muslim groups and states all over the poor world. So in order to have access to these cheap “petro-dollars” the leadership of the Northern Nigerian states only need to express their total commitment to Islam and Islamization and the hard cash will start to flow in to further enrich those leaders. It is in this light that one can understand the marathon trip undertaken by governor Ahmed Sani Yarima of Zamfara state to Pakistan, Egypt, Qatar, Sudan and Saudi Arabia at the peak of the international outcry, in 2001, over the poor Saffiatu Husein who is to be stoned to death for adultery though the man who impregnated her is set free. It is also known that Ibrahim al Zakzaky, the leader of the fanatical Muslim Brotherhood and a notorious trouble-shooter is heavily funded by Iran.

## **Fighting sharia**

A lot of noise has been made about the excesses of sharia but little has been put forth worthy of a solution to the

anomaly. Nigeria is broadly divided into Hausa Fulani north, the Ibo east, and the Yoruba west. The privileged classes in all these three areas always come up with issues that keep the masses distracted from the exploitation visited upon them by the same privileged classes who consider themselves leaders of their people. In the North today it is Sharia, in the West it is Oduwa People's Congress (OPC) which is demanding full control of the resources of “their land”, and in the East there are the various secessionist movements. The whole aim of fomenting troubles is for the leaders to carve out spheres of economic influence for themselves among their various ethnic groups.

All these sectional and divisionist activities can never solve the real problems of the people—poverty, disease, hunger, illiteracy, insecurity, war, etc. In fact the leaders who instigate the masses to go sharia or to secede and most of those who are seen to be taking issue with the excesses thereof are merely seeking to enhance their economic interests. Religion, secessionist movements, nationalism and many so-called human right activists are generally tools used by the ruling classes to perpetrate the status quo. All those involved in the promotion of such ideas are birds of the same feather. They hypocritically shout about freedom of conscience and self-determination, unity of mankind, justice, etc. Such double-standards expose not only their bankruptcy and insincerity but also the reactionary role of religion, secession and nationalism.

The only solution to those issues is to uproot the real cause of the problems – the overthrow of the unjust economic system in operation in today's world. It is the system which makes it possible for the masses to be ignorant and then it allows a few individuals to take advantage of this ignorance. This injustice becomes possible since under the present economic arrangement it is a few who control the world's wealth whilst the majority own nothing and so remain at the mercy of these few rich individuals. And that explains why religious patronage is a common phenomenon in Northern Nigeria where the wealthy “alhajis” “own” mosques and the poor in the neighborhood who go there to pray and recognize the “owner” as bossman, get petty favors and so can easily be manipulated.

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