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### Research Article

## A Study of Dimensions of Islamophobia in Nigeria: Causes and Solutions

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**Abstract.** Islamophobia is an unfounded fear of Islam and, more accurately, of his adherents i.e. Muslims. This phenomenon has found a fertile terrain in Nigeria given her status as a multi-religious society where Muslims and Christians live together as citizens. Over the years, Islamophobia has taken constitutional, diplomatic, educational, financial, and political dimensions in the country. Any Attempt by Muslims to live in line with their religious codes of conduct and without violating the constitutional provisions is often misconstrued by Christians - their religious counterparts- as a systematic way of Islamizing the country. However, the imaginary fear of Islam/Muslims by Christians is belied by the realities on ground. Against this backdrop, this paper will cast a look at Islamophobia as a concept with a view to highlight its various dimensions in Nigeria. After identifying possible causes of Islamophobia, practicable solutions shall be proffered accordingly. To achieve the objective, both historical and analytical methods shall be employed. Available resources as well as events in the recent past reveal that Islamophobia is not unconnected with misinformation about Islam at the instance of

some orientalists. It is also a possible consequence of violent activities of insurgent groups like Boko Haram which proclaim the Islamization agenda to terrorize the entire nation. The paper shall show that this insurgent group is ignorance based and stands condemned by the Muslim authority in the country. As such, the paper suggests adequate knowledge and tolerance as critical tools to curtail the menace of Islamophobia. This will go a long way in achieving mutual tolerance and peaceful co-existence among the adherents of Christianity, Islam, and other religions in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, Islam, Nigeria, Orientalism, Terrorism.

## INTRODUCTION

Islamophobia is the presumption that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and inassimilable. Combined with this is the belief that expressions of Muslim identity are correlative with a propensity for terrorism (Sahar Aziz, et al, 2022). It is an unfounded fear of Islam and more precisely of his adherents, the Muslims. Muslims living in the west such as the U.S, the UK, France, etc. are condemned to experiencing this ugly trend mainly due to their religious identity. It dated back to the eighteenth century in the US when the Muslim immigrants were denied the American citizenship for 154 years between 1790 and 1940 just for being Muslims (Sahar Aziz, et al, 2022). It however assumed a more acute dimension following the 9/11 episode as a result of which Muslims in the west, and all over the world, are presumed to be terrorists by default. This presumption is widely accepted not only in the western society where Muslims are the minority, it also gains a general acceptance in places that have Muslims as the majority living under the western system of government together with adherents of other religions especially Christianity. This is especially true of Nigeria given her status as multi-religious society where Muslims and Christians co-exist. Though Muslims enjoy the majority status, having a slight edge over Christians, they continue to be subjected to irrational and unfounded fear emanating from the Christian community. This trend manifests vividly in constitutional, educational, financial, and political dimensions. Historically, this unfounded fear of Islam could be logically traced to the time when both Northern (Muslim population) and Southern (Christian population) protectorates were amalgamated by the British colonial masters in 1914. This was in spite of the obvious incompatible huge cultural and religious differences which defined the amalgamated entities. Needless to say, this development could be identified as a fundamental and immediate cause of mutual mistrust between the Muslim and Christian communities in the country, which consequently results in Islamophobia. Aside this, ignorance and deliberate distortion of facts may also be considered as another cause of Islamophobia in Nigeria. These factors are embodied by orientalism and terrorism as represented by the Boko Haram insurgent group in the country.

Against this backdrop, this study intends to address the issue of Islamophobia in Nigeria with a view to identifying possible causes and proffering solutions. As a multi-religious society, it is indeed important that adherents of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria have basic knowledge of each other's religion. This knowledge it is hoped will go a long way in enhancing mutual tolerance and peaceful co-existence that is

devoid of unfounded fear of others which always serves as a basis for crisis. The study shall proceed as follows; Islam in Nigeria, concept of Islamophobia, its many dimensions in Nigeria, and conclusion.

### **Islam in Nigeria**

Islam is a divine religion which is based on oneness of the Creator (Tawhid). It is the religion which all prophets were mandated to preach to their respective communities. Specifically, Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet who was given the final and detailed precepts of Islam. Accordingly, the complete form of Islam started in the Arabian Peninsula in Makkah in the year 570 CE (Abdalati, n.d). From its birth-place, Islam spread to different parts of the world during the life time of the Prophet. The spread of Islam however continued after the demise of the Prophet (SAW) through the untiring efforts of the four rightly guided successors of the Prophet, the Umayyad, Abbasid as well as later Muslim kings, emperors, and sultans. Islam got to Africa, in the early period of Islam when the first batch of the migrants sought refuge in Abyssinia, the current Ethiopia. Subsequently Islam became known and well practiced in the entire African continent.

There are different accounts of when Islam actually spread to Nigeria. Seventh, eighth and tenth centuries have been mentioned in many historical accounts. However, there seems to be no controversy as to the fact that Borno was the first land with the first contact with Islam in what is now known as Nigeria. Later on, it gained access into Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo lands (Olayiwola 2014:11-20). It is also not in question the fact that Islam predated Christianity into Nigeria for a couple of centuries. As such, Muslims are in the majority in the Northern and South-Western parts of the country, while Christianity is the majority religion in the South-Eastern part. Given the fact that the Northern region has the largest number of states, 19 out of 36, it is therefore safe to conclude that Muslims constitute the majority in the country. This fact can be better appreciated when the results of National Censure are taken into consideration. While this fact may not be challenged, the exact percentage of Muslims vis-à-vis Christians is a subject of disagreement; it is put at different percentages (House of Commons Library, 2023). Yet, the fact remains that the population of Muslims is larger than that of Christians in Nigeria.

Given the fact that Muslims and Christians are the dominant religious groups in Nigeria, the country can be conveniently regarded as a multi-religious state, although, some people would submit that the country is a secular state (Akintola 2001, 116-123). This subjective submission is largely based on the wrong interpretation of section 10 of the constitution (Nigerian Constitution). But, a proper understanding of the letter and the spirit of the constitution would make one realize that far from conferring the secular status on the country, the constitution, among other things, only means that the country or state shall not adopt any particular religion as an official religion. Yet, every citizen shall enjoy freedom and right to profess and practice any religion of his choice without hindrance and interference.

Judging from how government, at state and federal levels, supports Islamic and Christian activities, one cannot but conclude that the Nigeria is far from being a secular state. Rather, the argument for it a multi-religious state is supported by

realities and government policies. Few examples will suffice to buttress this point; for Muslim and Christian communities, a commission is dedicated to cater for the welfare of Muslim and Christian pilgrims to ease their journey to holy places of Makkah and Jerusalem respectively. Also, each religious community has a befitting place of worship which was built with committed financial support of the government. Finally, at festival period of both religions, public holiday is declared to mark the festivals.

If the country can be considered as a multi-religious society, Islam should also be seen as the most dominant religion in comparison with Christianity. This is in view of certain historical and numerical advantages the former has over the latter. One, that the coming of Islam into Nigeria predated that of Christianity for some centuries is a historical fact which may not be denied by an objective historian. Two, the numerical advantage of Muslim population at every census activity in the country is also an incontrovertible fact. Though with these two considerations, Muslims deserve all sorts of rights accruable to the majority group, yet they have been living with their Christian counterparts as co-tenants with equal rights. As a matter of fact, Muslims have conceded certain things to the advantage of the Christian community. A case in point is declaration of Sunday as a public holiday for all official activities. The day in question is set aside for worship in the Christendom. But no similar holiday is declared on Friday which is also a special religious day of worship in Islam. Whereas Muslims work and struggle to observe Juma'ah prayer every Friday, their counterparts enjoy worship on Sunday free of tiring work. This preferential treatment enjoyed by the Christian community in Nigeria, is one of many instances of the colonial heritage which has remained till the present time without any complaint or challenge by the Muslim community.

Muslims in Nigeria are neither unaware nor indifferent to their constitutional rights. They do seek these rights in a way that does not trample upon those of their Christian counterparts. But despite this sense of understanding, the Christian community in Nigeria always express concerns whenever the Muslim community seek to enjoy their rights in line with the constitutional provisions. By default, the Christians always regard such efforts as a systematic way of Islamizing the whole country, hence, the trend of Islamophobia, which is unfounded fear of Islam.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Islamophobia

The concept of Islamophobia as a phenomenon is any irrational fear of Islam and Muslims by non-Muslims. According to Oxford English Dictionary, the term was first used in print in the American Periodical *Insight* in 1991, though it is believed that Dinet and Ibrahim used the term in 1925, albeit in a way different from its contemporary usage (Chris, 2000:15). It can be defined as “unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear and dislike of all or most Muslims. It is the fear and/or abhorrence of Islam, Muslims or Islamic culture. It can also be characterized by the belief that all or most Muslims are religious fanatics, have violent tendencies towards non-Muslims, and reject as directly opposite to Islam such concepts as equality and tolerance” (Mohamad, 2006:20). Islamophobia has its root in the west

obviously given the presence of Muslim communities in major European countries as well as in the US. While the concept had been in existence much earlier, it has enjoyed a wider popularity after the events of 9/11. This terrorist attack was seen as a proof that Islam is a violent religion, and Muslims accordingly are regarded as potential threats. Perhaps due to the ugly attacks of 9/11, the menace of Islamophobia is promoted by organizations and societies in the United States of America. For instance, there are about 37 groups whose primary objective is to spread prejudice against and hatred of Islam and Muslims. Also, another 32 groups are also entrenching Islamophobia in an indirect way, by providing support for the network's outer core in the U.S. For this purpose, huge funds are donated by influential people in America to the Islamophobia network. Between 2008 and 2011, at least \$119,662,719 was accessed by the inner core of the U.S.-based Islamophobia network. In addition, such organizations also propagate Islamophobia through legislative means. In 2011 and 2012, 78 bills or amendments were introduced in the legislatures of 29 states and the U.S. Congress. The objective of these was to vilify Islamic religions and practices (Corey, 2014:100). A prominent attorney working for the Centre for Security Policy and the American Freedom Law Center, David Yerushalmi wrote American Laws for American Courts ALAC which is the template for many anti-Islam bills introduced across the nation. He does not hide his hatred for Islam and Muslims. This he articulated in his remarks: "Our greatest enemy today is Islam. The only Islam appearing in any formal way around the world is one that seeks a world Caliphate through murder, terror and fear" (Corey, 2014:108).

It must however be pointed out that Islamophobia is not accepted by every individual and association in America. For instance, Republican State Senator Dave Thompson withdrew his Islamophobic bill after attending a press conference organized by CAIR-Minnesota and interfaith groups. Explaining the reason behind his action, he remarked that: "it was never my intent to introduce legislation that was being targeted to any one group" (Corey, 2014:113). In 2011, the American Bar Association expressed its opposition to the ALAC-type legislation that is targeted at Muslims. It submits that:

Initiatives that target an entire religion or stigmatize an entire religious community, such as those explicitly aimed at 'Sharia law', are inconsistent with some of the core principles and ideals of American jurisprudence. (Corey, 2014:110)

Of greatest concern for the Islamophobes is the fear of Shari'ah being introduced as part of American legal system. But this seems to be a non-existent problem. In fact, many of those figures and legislators who are pushing for anti-Shari'ah policies hardly understand what the divine law stands for. A senator in Alabama, Gerald Allen reportedly could not even define what the term Shari'ah means. Also, the claim that Shari'ah is being applied in some courts in America cannot be proved. This is because the American legal system does not give room for any foreign law, including Shari'ah (Corey, 2014"113).

Despite the failure of series of Islamophobic policies in America, the anti-Muslim sentiment in the west generally and America specifically is on alarming rate.

In 2011, a Pastor in America undertook a campaign to burn copies of the Qur'an. This malicious act was targeted at Muslims to spite them knowing full well that the Qur'an is the most coveted heritage of Muslims world over. Also, many violent attacks against Muslims living in the west often take place, and are deliberately underreported in the mainstream western media. As recent as March 15 2019 in New Zealand, a terrorist singlehandedly attacked and massacred Muslims who were worshipping in the mosque on Friday in Christchurch. With impunity, he killed more than fifty worshippers, leaving 50 others injured. It is however surprising that this dastardly act was not seen in the light of terrorism just as similar ones perpetrated by Muslims are profiled. Many so-called international mainstream media hesitated to describe the assailant as a terror. Initially, he was described as "a gun man" or "mass shooter" (Uche, 2019:24).

Though it originated in the West, Islamophobia, like cancer, has since spread to virtually all countries of the world. In Nigeria, one can feel the effect of Islamophobia despite the fact that Muslims are not in the minority and they are being considerate and circumspect in demanding for their constitutional rights to live in accordance with the dictates of their religion. Generally speaking, Islamophobia in the country has taken several dimensions namely, constitutional/ judicial, diplomatic, financial, socio-educational, and political. Instances under each dimension shall be highlighted in the following paragraphs.

### **Constitutional/Judicial Dimension.**

The Nigerian legal system is based on three sources, namely English Common law, Customary law, and Shari'ah. The first source is dominant because it is the law bequeathed by the colonial masters to Nigeria after attaining her independence in 1960. The customary law consists of principles that are in vogue in customs of people of Nigeria who belong to diverse tribes. However, the Shari'ah is a divine law subscribed to by Muslims as a religious law. It predates the birth of Nigeria as a nation. Not only that, it had been in existence before the coming of the colonial masters and was in full implementation in the Islamic caliphate system established by Shaykh 'Uthman Dan Fodio, a foremost Muslim reformer in 1804 AD. But after enduring for a century (1804 and 1904), the caliphate was gradually relegated by the colonial masters for the English common law to take its place. As a consequence, the English common law became a dominant source of the constitution of Nigeria and is superior to Shari'ah and Customary law. In other words, the scope of application of Islamic law which used to cover both civil and criminal aspects is now limited to the former only. Thus, only personal matters like *Nikah* (marriage), *Talaq* (divorce), *hadanah* (child paternity), *wasiyyah* (bequest), and *mirath* (estate distribution) can be determined in the court of law, namely Shari'ah court of appeal. But there is a constitutional provision that any state that so wishes may implement Shari'ah fully, in which case both civil and criminal laws can be decided in the Shari'ah court. Though, decisions of the Shari'ah court of appeal can still be appealed since the court is of appellate status. The court hierarchy has Supreme Court at the apex.

Conscious of the influential place of Shari'ah before the independence, Muslims of Nigeria keep demanding for the restoration of Shari'ah as a legal system

to regulate their life. In the 70s, the military government wanted to amend the constitution against the background of the nation's preparation to transit to the civil rule after a long military rule. The need was felt to amend the existing constitution which was a product of the colonial rule, and whose provisions are largely alien to cultural ethos of the people of Nigeria. There was a demand by Muslims to have a Federal Shari'ah Court of Appeal. Hitherto there had been Shari'ah Court of Appeal, albeit with limited jurisdictions. So, part of the recommendations of the Constitution Drafting Committee was the establishment of Federal Shari'ah Court of Appeal which shall be an intermediate Court of Appeal between the State Shari'ah Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Nigeria. This recommendation among others was debated widely in marked places, institutions, public transport and other places. For thorough debate, a Constituent Assembly was inaugurated so that a consensus could be reached about the Shari'ah. However, at the long run, the Shari'ah recommendation was jettisoned because it was seen by many Christians as well as some uninformed Muslims as a cunning move of Islamizing the country! Perhaps the first case that unmasked the trend of Islamophobia in Nigeria was the Shari'ah debate in the 70s (Jamiu, 2012). Thus, the Muslim demand for Federal Shari'ah Court of Appeal was wrongly construed by Christians out of malice. Though, it would not in any way affect them. In fact, it would not even be compulsory on Muslims to institute cases at the proposed court; it would be on voluntary basis. Despite this clear fact, and based on unfounded fear, the proposal was thwarted by Christians, thereby denying the willing Muslims the right to conduct their affairs in line with the laws of their religion.

The demand of Nigerian Muslims for Shari'ah came alive again in the northern part of the country shortly after the civilian rule was restored in 1999. Relying on the constitutional provisions, the then Governor of Zamfara State, Alhaji Yerima Bakura saw to the full implementation of Shari'ah in civil and criminal matters. Zamfara was followed by seven other northern states like Bauchi, Kano, Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi, Gombe, etc. This move was in line with constitutional provisions which allow any state that wants to implement Shari'ah fully to do so according to certain rules and regulations. Despite this, there was and there is still an outcry from non-Muslim citizens especially Christians. The implementation of Shari'ah is operative only in northern states of the country where Muslims are the majority, and thus, it does not affect non-Muslims in any negative way. Rather it is meant for Muslims who believe in it as a divine law. Yet, many Christians them mischievously consider the move as a way of Islamizing the entire country. They believe that Nigeria is not supposed to adopt a particular religion as state religion as emphasized in the constitution. They also argue that it is not proper to have two different legal systems where one of them is based on a particular religion in a secular state. (Gilbert, 2015).

The argument that there are two different legal systems fails to take cognizance of the fact that there three sources for the Nigerian constitution, namely the received English common law, Shari'ah, and Custom. It is wrong to believe that Islam is the only religion that is represented in these sources. This is because no objective mind will be in doubt that the received English common law which is the dominant and superior source of our constitution is to a large extent Christian in nature. The current constitution is the heritage of the British colonial masters whose

dual mission in Nigeria as in other colonized African countries were economic prosperity and evangelism. To achieve the second mission, they promoted western education with Christians being the sole beneficiaries. This could partly explain why Christians are more advanced educationally than Muslims in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, attainment of western education by Muslims was based on conversion as a condition. Thus, many Muslims that were enrolled for western education had their names changed to Christian names, and many eventually lost their Islamic faith as a consequence. This is especially true of the Yoruba Muslims in the South-West Nigeria (Oloyede, 2018:80-81).

The objection of Christians to the application of Islamic law in Nigeria is due to the misconception of the divine law by some Muslims and more especially, non-Muslims. This manifests in three major ways ('Deremi, 1986:9-10). Firstly, out of ignorance or mischief, it is believed that Shari'ah is all about stoning of an adulterer to death and chopping off the hand of a thief. However, the rationale behind the capital punishments in Islam is to serve as deterrent to others in order to achieve a sane and safe society. But this fact is deliberately overlooked. Secondly, it is wrongly believed that the Shari'ah is indiscriminately foisted on Muslims and non-Muslims. This is also baseless because the Shari'ah is mainly applied to Muslims, while matters affecting non-Muslims are decided according to the constitutional provisions. As a matter of fact, the Qur'an has excluded non-Muslims from the scope of the Shari'ah application. Allah says thus in the following Qur'anic verse:

The people of the Gospel should judge by what God has revealed in their Book. Whoever do not judge by what God has revealed are the transgressors. [Maidah: 47]

Thirdly, many people especially the southerners living in the northern part of the country often fear the application of Shari'ah due to the phobia for the judges of the Alkali courts who were seen as being arbitrary and mischievous in their application of the Shari'ah. This fear is not about the Shari'ah per se, but about the officer in charge of its application.

It should be clear from the above that the objection by non-Muslims to the Shari'ah application in Nigeria is essentially premised on myth and not on reality. It is not due to intrinsic problems identified with the divine legal system.

### **Diplomatic Dimension**

Nigeria is a sovereign nation, having gained her independence in 1960 from the British authority. As a consequence, it enjoys diplomatic ties with other similar sovereign nations, regional and international bodies. It is an influential leader of African Union (AU), a significant member of commonwealth nations, and an important member of United Nations (UN). Both Muslims and Christians are equal stakeholders in the country as several influential positions have been held by adherents of Islam and Christianity as the two dominant religions in the country. In the past and in the recent time, Muslims and Christians have occupied the offices of Military Head of State, President, Vice-President, Chief Justice of Nigeria, Senate President, Speaker, House of Assembly, etc.



Nevertheless, the red flag of Islamophobia was raised in 1986 when the country, under the Military Head of State General Ibrahim Babangida, obtained full membership of OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference, NOW Cooperation) having enjoyed an Observer status for some years. This diplomatic move was met with Islamophobic reactions of Christians and was seen as a move towards Islamizing the country. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was and is still critically opposed to membership of Nigeria in OIC and called for the withdrawal saying:

We urge withdrawal because we have carefully examined the arguments put forward in favour of continued membership – religious, economic, political, diplomatic etc, and we find them all unconvincing. On the contrary, we raise one fundamental objection to Nigeria's entry into the OIC. With its religious pluralism, Nigeria cannot as a state become a member of an international body whose objectives are essentially the promotion of one particular religion. To do that would mean injustice to other religions and to their adherents. This injustice in an area so all-embracing and sensitive as religion is bound to manifest itself also in other areas of national life, political, economic, social, cultural, legal, etc (Christian, 2018:15).

Behind the vehement opposition of CAN is the fear that Nigeria would be Islamized with her membership at OIC. But this claim is not only Islamophobic but malicious and selfish. In a country where Muslims are arguably in the majority, there should not be any hindrance for Muslims or for the government to join interest bodies and associations for socio-economic development of the nation. Muslims have rights to belong to the organization as enshrined in the constitution. What makes this claim malicious and selfish is the fact that Nigeria, ever before obtaining OIC membership, had been enjoying robust diplomatic ties with the Vatican, which is the global Christian body. In addition to having a High Commissioner in Rome, Nigeria also has a mission in the Vatican City. This makes Italy the only country where Nigeria maintains two separate missions: the first one is for general purposes, while the second one is for a religious purpose (Shittu, 2011:112).

Moreover, the claim of Islamizing the country through OIC membership is not supported by the realities. This is because membership of the OIC is not confined to Arab or Muslim nations like Saudi Arabia. Rather, it is also open to multi-religious countries like Nigeria and even to secular or Christian countries. For instance, Sierra Leone (since 1972), Gabon (since 1974), Uganda (since 1974), Cameroon (since 1975), Mozambique (since 1994), Togo (since 1997), Cote d'Ivoire (since 2001) etc. have been members of OIC ever before Nigeria joined the organization. One then wonders why these predominantly Christian nations have not been Islamized. Instead, these countries have been enjoying interest-free loan from Islamic Development Bank (IDB), a subsidiary of OIC, for socio-economic developments (Shittu, 2016:114). As a matter of fact, Nigeria has also accessed huge interest-free loans from IDB courtesy of her OIC membership. Recently, the country just got *Sukuk* i.e. Islamic bonds, with zero interest rate. This development was equally seen as a process of Islamizing the country, despite the fact the former Vice President of the country Prof. Osinbajo who

was a renown pastor in a prominent Church in the country, had debunked the connection of *sukuk* with any Islamization agenda in Nigeria when he said:

there were no plans to Islamize Nigeria through *sukuk* bond or the country's membership in Islamic Development Bank. Nigeria is the fourth largest shareholder in the Islamic Bank (Christian, 2018:15).

### **Socio-Educational Dimension**

This dimension of Islamophobia seems to be the most recurrent one. It is about the use of hijab by female Muslim pupils and students in the public primary and secondary schools. There have been reported cases of forcing female Muslim pupils/ students to remove their head covers in some public schools in Ilorin, Ibadan, Lagos, etc. This is but a blatant denial of their constitutional rights. For instance, in Lagos, a female student, 12, was reportedly flogged by her school principal for wearing hijab (Rafiu, 2015:). It is difficult to find a reasonable basis for the principal's action, save the fear of domination of Muslims in the concerned school.

It should be noted that the public schools where objection to Hijab usually occurs are schools that were formerly established and managed by the Christian missionary bodies. But these schools as well as those established and managed by Muslim societies later became the public schools when the government decided to take over them with the mutual agreement of the former owners. Hence, the government is fully responsible for those schools by way of funding and appointment of personnel. Yet, the former owners still feel the sense of entitlement towards the schools which propel them to always stand against the use of Hijab by female Muslim pupils/students. However, the judgement by the Supreme court on the recent case of Hijab in Lagos affirms that female Muslim pupils/students have the right to use Hijab if they so wish (Daily Trust, 2022).

The hijab case in Nigeria became a national issue in 2017 when Amosa Firdaus, a law graduating student in the Nigerian Law School was barred from entering the hall during the Call to Bar ceremony just because she was wearing hijab. The authority had asked her to remove her hijab, but she declined and preferred to face the consequence, namely the denial of graduation that year. This incidence generated reactions not only from the citizens of the country, but from across the globe. The case was later resolved by the Judicial Council, and the young lady was eventually allowed to graduate in the following year with her small hijab which she carefully used in a smart way.

### **Financial Dimension**

Financially speaking, the issue of interest-free banking has also generated a heated debate nationwide. The banking system in Nigeria is based on interest which is at variance with the dictates of Islam. Out of commitment to their religious regulations, the Muslim community in the country felt the need to have a banking system that is devoid of interest. Hence the clamour for the establishment of an Islamic banking system resulted in the unveiling of Islamic banks such as Jaiz, Taj, and Lotus banks. Though the demand of the Muslim community is within the ambit of the law that regulates banking system in the country, there was an allegation by

the Christian community that the idea of Islamic banking was a systematic way of Islamizing the country. In addition to this, Malam Sanusi Lamido, the then governor of Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) was accused of implementing the 'Northern Agenda' to Islamize Nigeria (Shittu, 2016:118). This was despite the fact that the idea of Islamic banking was approved by his predecessor Charles Soludo who is a Christian. The claim of Islamizing the country through the means of Islamic banking is at best a reflection of ignorance of the global realities and practices in the banking system. This is because Islamic banking and finance has been embraced in many western countries with Christians as majority. Good examples are countries like the United Kingdom of Britain, Canada, and South Africa. Not minding the Islamic origin of the system, these countries only desire to achieve equity and justice in the financial sector which is the ultimate goal of the Islamic banking system.

The objection by Christians to Islamic banking in Nigeria cannot be unconnected with the fear of influence and dominance of Muslims in the country which, according to them, could lead to the Islamization of the country. But this fear is baseless and is uncalled for due to two reasons: one, the transaction within the purview of Islamic banking and finance is largely for Muslims. This is not even mandatory on every Muslim; rather it is voluntary for whoever wishes to avoid transactions that are based on Riba which is utterly prohibited in the Qur'an (Q2:275-281). In other words, non-Muslims are not mandated to patronize Islamic banking and finance. The second reason is that the prohibition of interest-based loan is not peculiar to Muslims. Christians are also prohibited from interest-based transactions as unequivocally contained in the Bible (Lev. 25:35).

### **Political Dimension**

In the political sphere, Muslim candidates vying for different political positions are always victims of Islamophobia. A case in point was the 2015 general elections where Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the northern part of the country, was the presidential candidate for All Progressive Party (APC). The national chairman of his party is a Christian, John Oyegun, while the vice-presidential candidate, Prof. Osinbajo, is not only a Christian but an active pastor in a prominent church in the country. Despite this, the party was termed as an Islamist party, and the presidential candidate was seen as a fundamentalist who was hell bent to impose Shari'ah on the people of Nigeria! Worst still, the media officer of the opposition party went to link the Muslim candidate to terrorist groups like ISIS regarding him as their sponsor and financier (Pulse Nigeria, 2015). Though no concrete proof and evidence was presented by the claimant to support his claim! But most electorates refused to be misled by the propaganda and they went ahead to vote for the Muslim candidate eventually.

Perhaps, the latest string of Islamophobia in the political dimension in Nigeria is the Muslim/Muslim ticket presented by the ruling party, namely All Progressive Party. In other words, the presidential flag bearer and his running mate are Muslims, namely Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Ahmad Shettima respectively. This decision did not go down well with the Christian community in Nigeria as they claimed that the Muslim/Muslim ticket is a critical process of Islamizing the country. But the realities

on ground do not support this claim. The ruling party that decided to present the two Muslim candidates did so in line with the political exigencies and with the ultimate purpose of recording success in the general elections. Besides, the presidential flag bearer, namely Bola Ahmed Tinubu, though a Muslim, cannot be said to have a Muslim family. This is because his wife is not only a Christian, but a pastor of the most populous church in the country. And by implication, none of his children could be said to practice Islam. Yet, many Christians accused Muslims of the Islamization agenda by the means of politics.

### **Causes of Islamophobia in Nigeria and Solution**

The existence of Islamophobia in Nigeria is not accidental. Looking at the past events as well as the present realities, one can identify two major factors responsible for unfounded fear of Islam by non-Muslims especially Christians. These factors include Orientalism and terrorism.

Orientalism is an intellectual movement that studies Islam, its history, language, law, adherents, and its civilization as a whole. Originated in the west, the approach adopted by orientalists in their studies of Islam is largely subjective. Major works produced by orientalists on Islam are laced with distortion of facts. Unfortunately, some of these works were used by the colonial masters as first-hand references and vital information as parts of tools needed for the invasion and colonization of many Muslim countries in the Asian and African continents. Especially in Africa, the missionaries also relied on the works of orientalists on Islam to perfect their strategy in their evangelical efforts. The negative impression about Islam was therefore spread by orientalists and was later upheld by Christians, a fact that informs their ill-feeling towards Muslims as sworn enemies that should be eliminated, not as partners with whom they should work on common moral values for the development of the nation. The working relationship between the imperialists and orientalists was largely responsible for the success of the colonization agenda of many Muslim countries in and outside Africa. (Haroon, 2003:34).

Works or books produced by orientalists are full of prejudices portraying Muslims as evil human beings. They are described as “violent”, “warmongering”, “static” and “savage” (Sahar Aziz, et al, 2022). This negative portrayal also features in the text books at the primary school level in Nigeria. For instance, there is the Macmillan English textbook for pupils primary four and five which features a story that portrays Ali an evil man who used magic to take the wife of a prince and turned her into a dog. In the story, Ali was the only character with the Muslim name, while others were given names suggesting that they are non-Muslims. The negative impression that the pupils will have about any human being bearing the name cannot be denied. (Haroon, 2002).

Terrorism is the second factor that is responsible for the spate of Islamophobia in Nigeria. At the global level, the west began her indiscriminate war against terrorism following the 9/11 attacks. This puts every Muslim living in the west at risk of being suspected, arrested, and tortured based on the assumption that every Muslim is a terrorist. On the same premise of assumption, many Muslim countries were unjustly invaded such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine thereby destroying the people and

resources. This stereotyping has led to reprisal attacks from some Islamic elements in the countries mentioned as well as others out of solidarity for fellow Muslims being wrongly punished. By and large, this creates some fear in the hearts of non-Muslims across the world. While terrorism is not acceptable in Islam, the fact is that the west started the process because of her wrong accusation and false assumption that every Muslim is a terrorist especially those among them that are committed to Islam (Sahar Aziz, 2022).

It is however important to note that beyond reacting to the injustice met on Muslims as a result of the war on terrorism, there are some Muslim groups who actually get involved in terrorist activities in a suspicious manner because of the illogical consequences of their dastard activities. A good example is Boko Haram insurgent group in Nigeria which does not spare Muslims in their terrorist attacks under the guise of Jihad thereby killing innocent lives and destroying property in Nigeria. This development further aggravates the tension of Islamophobia in Nigeria. The history of insurgency in Nigeria dates back to the early 80s when the Maitesini insurgency broke out in the northern part of the country (Danjibo n.d). The scourge of insurgency continues till the present time with Boko Haram which has been perpetrating killings and destructions since 2009 till date (Danjibo n.d). The victims of the insurgency are not limited to Christians, but Muslims are also targeted by the insurgent group. As well as churches, mosques have also been attacked by Boko Haram killing fellow Muslims in the sacred place of worship. Despite these atrocities, the group still claims that it is engaging in Jihad against non-Muslims in the country. This claim has been accepted by many Christians, though there is a perspective that the insurgent group is a creation of some non-Muslim elements with the sole agenda of tarnishing the image of Islam and indeed Muslims. Despite this, many Christians still feel that Muslims have an agenda to Islamize Nigeria at the expense of other faiths especially Christianity (Fred et al, 2004).

This fear of Islam and Muslims by Christians is largely Islamophobic because it lacks concrete and convincing evidence to support it. Though, the insurgent groups of Maitesini and Boko Haram claim to be defending Islam, their actions are not only arbitrary but antithetical to the teachings of Islam. This explains why they are outright condemned by individual Muslims, Muslim societies, as well as the constituted religious authority in the country i.e. Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA). If the claim of Islamization was true, the insurgent groups would have gotten the backing of the religious authorities in the country. But the claim is false as it is baseless.

Another fact that shows the fallacy of the Jihad claim of Boko Haram on one hand, and the myth of Islamization of Nigeria as claimed by some Christians on the other hand, is that the insurgent group concentrates their deadly attacks in the north which has the largest percentage of Muslims, whereas the eastern region with the Christian population is spared. The main purpose of Jihad is to protect the religion of Islam against any external aggressions and to restore justice. In principle, it is undertaken in order to shield Muslims who practise Islam from the attacks of non-Muslims. But the Boko Haram version of Jihad makes Muslims its targets. Till date, the consistent deadly attacks of Boko Haram's have reduced the northern region,

which is predominantly Muslim population, to the slaughter 'house'. Many northerners who are mostly Muslims have become refugees in their own lands and now live in camps made for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The insurgent group does not even spare mosques which are considered in Islam as 'houses of Allah' that should be venerated and preserved. If they were actually fighting for Islam, they would spare the northern region where a larger percentage of Muslims reside. Yet, the people of the northern region remain the prime victims of Boko Haram's senseless attacks (Punch, 2023).

No doubt, Islamophobia is largely informed by ignorance and malice. Therefore, there is need for adequate knowledge and tolerance. Islam preaches love and respect. It teaches that a non-Muslim who does not attack Muslims should not be attacked.

## CONCLUSION

Islamophobia is an ugly reality in Nigeria that feeds on Islamization agenda, an untrue allegation made by many Christians against Muslims. Based on the fear of Islamizing the country, many Christians always raise a false alarm each time Muslims, their fellow Nigerians, make a move to conduct their affairs in line with the teachings of their religion and within the provisions of the constitution. This Islamophobic feeling is activated and manifests in many dimensions ranging from constitutional cum judicial to diplomatic, financial, socio-educational, and political aspects. A typical example is the clamour for the application of Shari'ah in some northern states with the majority of Muslims. For a fact, there are two major reasons for this false claim of Islamizing Nigeria which gives rise to Islamophobia. The first reason is works or books produced by orientalist which tend to distort the history of Islam and portray Muslims as violent people that should be avoided at least. The second reason is not unconnected with atrocities of Boko Haram, a fugitive group which claims to be fighting for Islam in a bogus version of Jihad. These two reasons can best explain the unease feelings some Christians have towards Muslims and Islam generally. To allay the unfounded fear of Islam and Muslims, two urgent measures are imperative. One, non-Muslims should discard malicious materials on Islam, and instead seek the information from the impeccable sources. Two, the religious groups and organizations should embark on massive condemnation of the attacks of Boko Haram to dispel their false Jihad claim.

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