



SECULARISM, RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND LAND GRABBING FRIGHTS

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Abstract

Nigeria is a secular state, in spite of multiple threats and disparaging questions regarding the country's secularism. However, while the label of secularism on Nigeria's constitution creates the impression of accommodation, tolerance and liberty of religious groups and sects, the reality of recurring interreligious acrimonies ridicules the claim. Religious extremism and land grabbing frights are among the numerous challenges undermining the image of Nigeria's secularism. Recent reports reveal that fears of land grabbing which are linked to the operations of killer-herdsmen have increased. Nigerians have witnessed high level violent conflicts, destruction of property and wanton loss of lives. Non-pastoral communities in southern and north-central states of Nigeria where Christianity is dominant and migrant cattle herding is uncommon believe that quests for religious dominance and fears associated with land grabbing are responsible for the frequent invasion of their communities. This study interrogates ways in which longstanding perceptions of religious extremism and land grabbing frights fuel crises of secularism in Nigeria. It argues that acts of estrangement against the principles of secularism by any religious sect in a heterogenous society is a harbinger for protracted intergroup hostility and violent conflicts. The paper interrogates the worsening security challenges plaguing migrant herders as they traverse non-pastoral communities of southern and north-central states of Nigeria where Christianity is popular. It relies on secondary data as well as thematic content analysis. The study also draws attention to ways in which unguarded government policies and development projects which are, directly or indirectly, susceptible to diverse religious (re)interpretations pose huge threats to secularism.

Keywords: Land Grabbing, Migrant Herding, Southern and North-Central States, Non-Pastoral Christian Communities, Religious Fundamentalism

Introduction

Secularism does not favour the promotion of transcendental ideas, primordial beliefs, ethnic jingoism or religious fervour over the public interest of the state and its institutions. On the contrary, when a society purges itself from the negative influences of mysticism and primeval folklores, it begins to achieve a level of emancipation necessary for the take-off of

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modernization (Pérez and Vallières, 2019). Rather than promote ethnic supremacy, secularism canvasses for the equality and liberty of all in the interest of nationalism and peace. In a secular state, national wealth, public institutions and governmental laws are not subordinated to patrimonial patronage whereby resource allocation is pigeonholed to favour one particular group of people over others. As a philosophical ideology of progress and modernization, secularism provides a guiding principle and framework for the development of a state, especially in societies where the population is heterogenous. Rationally, pluralism is 'one of the most important factors leading to secularization, since it undermined the plausibility of religion and eroded norms prescribing religion' (Stolz, 2020: 13). Secularism reinforces socialization, civil liberty and cordial intergroup relations especially in heterogenous nations where the probability that individuals will come in contact with others who belong to different ethnic religions or those who express no faith in any religion at all is certain.

In Nigeria, religion and ethnic bigotry are a major factor affecting development plans, processes of resource allocation and nation-building (Akingbe, 2022). As a secular and heterogenous society, Nigerian citizens move and reside freely in states of their choice, whether in the southern or northern regions where Christianity and Islam (respectively) are dominant. Consequently, whenever attempts are made by any of the religious sects or federating units to impose religious ideas, tension and security crises of national proportion are ignited. When Sharia laws were promulgated in some states in northern Nigeria between 2000 and 2003 (Nwankpa, 2021), Christians residing in the region reacted and contentious questions about the nature and character of the Nigerian secularism were raised. In northern Nigeria, the Boko Haram sect espouses the 'rejection of secularism, democracy, Western education and Westernization. ... The rejection of secularism and the pursuit of its replacement by Sharia is a current in radical Islam ...' (Mohammed, 2014: 8). Boko Haram regards Christians and churches as enemies and rightful targets of attack. There have been moments of anxiety bordering on fears and speculations of attempts to register Nigeria in the Organization of Islamic Conference and adopt Islam in the country's constitution (Binuomoyo, 2018). In Nigeria, southerners and many communities in north-central region always react negatively to perceived tendencies towards religious domination. The rapid formation of regional vigilante outfits such as the *Amotekun* by Nigerian south-western governors as well as the Indigenous People of Biafra's Eastern Security Network by south-easterners were partly in response to eventualities of religious imposition on southern Nigeria (Nwankpa, 2021).

Constitutionally, Nigeria is a secular state. However, since its creation in 1914, the country's secularism has faced a lot of challenges. Extant literature has documented diverse ways in which religious fundamentalism and violent conflicts threaten the image and justification of Nigeria as a secular state. In addition, this study delves into problems associated with religion-induced (re)interpretation of suspicious government development policies, tendencies towards land grabbing, religious tension bordering on the religious identity of migrant herders who traverse non-pastoral Christian dominated communities especially in southern and north-central regions of Nigeria.

Conceptual Review on Secularism

Over the years, the concept of secularism has evolved to assume more notions about the neutrality of the state on religious matters. The concept has largely been redefined to connote the separation of the earthly from the transcendental, partitioning of terrestrial activities away from the celestial or detachment of temporal matters from the spiritual. It is held that secularism introduces a sphere of life in which there is a rejection of beliefs conditioned on the

idea that that which is divine and supreme determines and controls that which is obtained in the material world and where modern societies no longer hold on to the concept that the law of the gods shape the foundations of human government, laws and activities (Ertit, 2018). Nevertheless, it is instructive to note that the concept of secularism is multidimensional and has a range of meanings. Secularism goes beyond the popular notion and quest for separation between activities considered as belonging to the realm of the 'Divine' and other activities classified as belonging to the 'Humans'. It has much to do with the declining influence of religion or the reduction of the impacts and power of religious authorities on the activities of the state, government and society. As I argued elsewhere (Onwutuebe, 2020), the entrenchment of secularism in any given society does not imply that religion will fade away or disappear from the realms of the state, but it fosters a noticeable reduction in the impact of organized religion in public affairs as well as other primeval chauvinisms such as the elevation of ethnic nationalism over allegiance to the state.

Humans are moral beings whose thought processes and private decisions often allow space for religious influences that may or may not be acknowledged. In reality, religion does not go into extinction but may be regulated by public institutions in order to pursue and achieve general or societal goals. Nevertheless, when the undercurrents of religion are subjugated and brought under the effective control of the state (and not vice versa), processes of nation-building are reinforced. Similarly, when primordial ethnic loyalties which reduce state nationalism are reversed in ways that accord supremacy to national concerns, public institutions are empowered and promoted to drive national developmental initiatives. Secularism clears the pathway for a society to deactivate the excesses of religious pressure and to turn-off the red flags of ethnic loyalties that impede state patriotism. The fear of religious and ethnic domination is usually the basis for the constitutional promulgation and practice of secularism. In the early decades of the American independence, there were heightened religious fears of probable domination against religious minorities by the powerful Catholic Church. To avert anxieties over imminent religious tyranny under the Roman Catholic Church, massive campaign for secularism was made, hence the constitutional endorsement of secularism in the US (Ryan, 2017; Onwutuebe, 2020).

Migrant Herding in Non-pastoral Christian Communities

In Benue and Plateau states, land grabbing frights regularly accompany accounts of horrendous invasions and attacks by migrant pastoralists. Bloodletting violence in these states usually result to massive population displacement of indigenous peoples whose lands are sometimes evacuated and left unoccupied, depending on the agenda of the invaders. In response, migrant herders are profiled as criminals, murderers and targeted for attacks especially among non-pastoral Christian populations (Saminu, et. Al., 2022; Akingbe, 2022). Most of them experience widespread discrimination, especially in the southern and north-central regions where land policies seem not favour their beliefs, preferences and traditional livestock practices (Nwankpa, 2021). Many states in southern and north-central regions have passed bills prohibiting unrestrained open grazing into laws and also established local security outfits to enforce laws against transhumance pastoralism. A recent report from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reveal that migrant herders are experiencing problems of attacks and human rights abuses on a wide scale (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2023). The report alleged that there are government-backed hostilities against them. There are tales of economic marginalization and forced displacement against migrant herders as they are imaged as aliens or foreigners. Recent anti-open grazing laws passed

by many states in both southern and north-central regions of Nigeria have been described as targeting migrant herders since the core of their livelihood is tied around transhumance pastoralism.

Migrant herding as a form of occupational practice and daily business is not common in southern and north-central regions of Nigeria. It is however prevalent in northwestern and northeastern Nigeria where, beyond its cultural and religious significations, it is a source wealth creation. As an occupational group whose religion is mainly Islam, migrant herders often encounter religious tension especially among non-pastoral Christian dominated communities. Religious division and threats of religious fundamentalism constitute a key factor hampering probabilities for peaceful intergroup relations with migrant herders in Nigeria. In Christian-dominated regions of southern and north-central Nigeria, indigenes are encouraged to be vigilant in order to protect themselves and defend their lands against extraneous groups particularly migrant herders (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2023). There is a high level of trust deficit and suspicion that undermine prospects of a healthy intergroup cooperation with migrant herders traversing Nigerian lands (Nwankpa, 2021). In Benue and Plateau states where hundreds of thousands of lives have been wasted with impunity, extraordinary interventions, including prolonged prayer and fasting, will be required to re-establish sustainable trust and cordial relations with migrant herders.

Buhari's National Livestock Transformation Plan and the Frights of Land Grabbing

Throughout his civilian administration as Nigerian president, Buhari was consistently committed to improving the country's livestock industry. He defied several oppositions against his government's agenda on national livestock development. Buhari made frantic effort to resuscitate the 1965 northern Nigeria regional law which canvassed for the establishment and development of grazing reserves and cattle corridors (Akingbe, 2022). During his civilian government (2015 to 2023), Buhari's major goal was to extend grazing reserves and cattle routes beyond the northern region, spreading it across all states of the Nigerian federation, in spite of stiff resistance from non-pastoral Christian communities in southern and north-central regions of the country. As ingenious as the Buhari livestock plan was and the multiple promises of national wealth that would accrue to the Nigerian federation, longstanding suspicion of religious expansion through land grabbing surged in most communities of southern and north-central Nigeria. The logic was that Buhari sought to utilize his endearing proposal of national livestock development as a pretext to acquire vast areas of land across all states of the federation for purposes of religious expansion. The fury and fear engendered by such suspicions of land grabbing was fierce. Non-pastoral populations in southern and north-central regions feared that Buhari was going to use his presidential might to lobby and influence state governors to submit to his federal livestock program (Nwabueze, 2018).

Incidentally, Buhari's devotion, zeal, and relentless efforts to upgrade the livestock industry across the length and breadth of the Nigerian society became a burden of mistrust in itself. There was the Cattle Colony proposal. The Buhari government pledged that the Cattle Colony proposal was the panacea to problems of hostilities and violent conflicts plaguing farmers and migrant herders in Nigeria (Amusan, Abegunde & Akinyemi, 2017). Each state within the federation was expected to set aside large hectares of land for the project. The sound of this initiative ballooned existing fears of land grabbing across the federation (Obahopo, 2018; Nwabueze, 2018). Sensing the barrage of negative sentiments and resistance against the Cattle Colony proposal, Buhari bowed out and later came up with another livestock development initiative known as the Rural Grazing Areas (RUGA). The RUGA settlement initiative also failed to

scale through as similar suspicions of land grabbing trailed its arrival. In another quick succession, Buhari introduced the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) in June 2019 and almost immediately commenced its implementation among seven states that indicated interest to participate in the program (This Day, 2019).

Beyond fears and suspicions of religious expansion against Buhari's uninterrupted livestock initiatives, there were allegations of nepotism in favour of migrant herders. Continuous rebranding and renaming of the same livestock project in quick successions heightened suspicions that the Buhari government was desperate to solidarize with pastoral groups by using federal executive powers to acquire land for them. States and groups that opposed Buhari's new livestock initiative argued that the NLTP was *Ruga-disguised* (PulseNg, 2019). Buhari's livestock visions appeared to have been driven by the same zeal and eagerness to procure lands in all the states of the federation in support of cattle farming (The Guardian, 2019). On the other hand, fears and resistance against Buhari's livestock projects were driven largely by land grabbing frights and suspicions of religious expansionism.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Secularism is a universal concept which encourages principles of liberty, fairness and equality of all social groups. It encourages interfaith coexistence and the equality of all religious groups. Secularism advocates neutrality and detachment of government, state and public institutions from all forms of religious influences. On the other hand, lack of faith in secularism breeds mistrust and suspicions mainly among religious communities that perceive it to be a Western political thought seeking to degrade the cultural, social and religio-political systems of other nations and peoples. Though Nigeria is constitutionally labelled a secular state, awful attempts to categorize secularism as a Western ideology has been used to disorient a large number of Nigerians to make them feel that secularism is amoral, malevolent and against indigenous values. More often than not, the act of demonizing secularism is the handiwork of religious fundamentalists and selfish politicians attempting to elevate their narrow religious beliefs and political objectives up and above others. In Nigeria, Jihadists are averse to descriptions of the Nigerian constitution as secular and ready to undermine adherence to it.

Religious division between southern and northern regions of Nigeria has adverse consequences for transhumance pastoralism. Migrant pastoralists from northern Nigeria where Islam is widespread encounter religious tension and discrimination especially when traversing non-pastoral Christian dominated communities in southern and north-central states. In Benue and Plateau states (in north-central Nigeria), notions of quest for religious domination and land grabbing frights are commonly distilled in stories of invasion and attacks by migrant herders. In addition to land grabbing, attacks led by or involving migrant herders in these states are sometimes interpreted as preliminary actions meant to pave way for religious expansionism. The outcome of religious contraptions pitching migrant herders against their host communities is that migrant pastoral groups experience all manner of suspicion, discrimination, social anomie and, in extreme situations, counterattacks especially from non-pastoral Christian populations in southern and north-central states. To address multiple threats confronting Nigerian secularism, the study recommends increased awareness and wider exposition on the actual meaning and characterizations of secularism. All avenues of information dissemination should be deployed to ensure regular or periodic sensitization on the principles and relevance of secularism. Families, schools, mass media and social media spaces should be used. More importantly, religious leaders who regularly teach and indoctrinate their adherents should be made to uphold the principles of secularism as an essential component of peace and development. Religious leaders

and elites who are agenda setters and opinion leaders in churches, mosques, shrines and other sacred places should consider secularism a core doctrine for peace and social harmony. Religious interpretations which image secularism as being antithetical to Jihadism must be jettisoned to halt rising trends of religious extremism.

In Nigeria, Pastors and Imams must be involved in the struggle to use secularism as a tool for national integration. Christianity and Islam are major religions often implicated in interfaith conflicts in Nigeria. Consequently, religious ideas which radicalize people especially vulnerable youths must be expunged from their sermons and sacred texts. Again, the overbearing influence of religious sentiments in the way and manner private and public institutions are set up and governed must be redressed. Public institutions and state operations should be disentangled and emancipated from religious strongholds which pervert civic duties. Soft power mechanisms especially those of social and cultural diplomacy could also be used in targeting rustic communities and social groups like migrant herders whose economic activities require cross-border and intra-country movements and expose them to communities and peoples whose religion are antithetical to theirs. Social activities and cultural programs which appeal to migrant herders could be organized to draw them close, while seeking to teach and aid them to unlearn erroneous ideas of secularism. Rustic workshops could be organized to teach and help migrant herders embrace the values of secularism. Enlightenment campaigns can also help in deradicalizing and reorienting social groups whose worldviews are parochial and averse to secularism.

Governments and political leadership in fragile religion-overwhelmed countries like Nigeria must exercise high level caution when enacting policies or administering projects which are delicately susceptible to diverse religious translations. Many Nigerians are actively involved in religion and highly sensitive or amenable to faith-based ideologies. They tend to coopt religious beliefs and laws while attempting to read, understand and interpret government policies, programs and projects. High religious tension gripped the Nigerian religio-political landscape during the civilian administration of former President Muhammadu Buhari. Buhari's efforts to promote the country's livestock sector was, rightly or wrongly, translated as an attempt to exploit state power to acquire lands throughout the Nigerian federation for reasons other than livestock development. Frights of land grabbing generated by Buhari's livestock policies elicited massive resistance especially among southern and north-central states where non-pastoral Christian populations are widespread.

Nigeria's secular status must be cautiously guarded especially by those in public institutions and political leadership. Although individuals in public authority might be inherently religious, their performances as public functionaries must be neutral and void of religious emotions and dictates. Presidential gestures and permutations with semblance of religious favouritism will always raise widespread suspicion and increase trust deficits against political leadership. This was the political situation which hampered former President Buhari's ability to mobilize nationwide support to execute his livestock initiatives.

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