THE PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF ISLAM IN NIGERIA – THE ROLE OF
NIGERIA SUPREME COUNCIL FOR ISLAMIC AFFAIRS (NSCIA)

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1.0: INTRODUCTION

Islam entered Nigeria through the efforts of Islamic workers led by Uthman Dan Fodio. From Sokoto which first witnessed the rays of light and guidance which Islam guarantees for mankind, the religion spread, not without difficulties, to other parts of the country. In Nigeria today, Islam and the Muslims face many challenges.

This paper examines these challenges and proposes practical roles the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) should assume to combat them and provide a path of visionary leadership for the Nigerian Muslims and the Nigerian nation.

2.0: CHALLENGES OF ISLAM IN NIGERIA

Many challenges face the growth and survival of Islam and the Muslims in Nigeria today, like all around the world. They are so diverse and complex that the scope of this work cannot do justice to them. But some of the most disheartening ones would briskly be examined.

2.1: Disunity and intolerance

In my estimation, the single most threatening problem Islam faces in Nigeria today is disunity among the Muslims. There exist many Islamic organizations mostly propagating irreconcilable ideologies and working at cross-purposes. So while tremendous energy is expended by them in the Islamic work, the total effect is often zero and sometimes negative due to “picking on one another’s mistakes, neglecting positive contributions, and belittling others’ achievements...”1

First, too many of them concentrate only on some aspects of Islam, viz: taqheed, prayer, wudu, mahram, Hajj, etc. One often sees them discuss and teach these in very minute details. That is a good thing. The real problem is in the deliberate restriction of Islam and its teachings to only those matters, whereas Islam is a holistic system of life.²

Second, the proliferation of Islamic movements³ has the effects that many Muslim groups often wage ideological warfare on one another on even the most negligible of issues such as the use of prayer rosary, the length of the beards and whether a woman’s khimar could be two pieces of clothing or must be one. These have created crevices in mutual understanding and sometimes resulted into skirmishes. The result has been accurately illustrated in the image below:

![Image](image_url)


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² Allah says in Qur’an 6:38: “We have not neglected anything in this Book... In Qur’an 16:89, He also says: “…And We have revealed the Book to you explaining clearly everything.”

³ Between November and December, 2011, I ran a 3 parts series for the now rested media outfit, IslamOnline in Qatar. The 3 articles critically examined this problem and interviewed prominent Muslim leaders across these movements in Nigeria: <http://www.islamonline.net-eng/article/1304971134247> accessed on 20 December, 2011.
I have not lived long, but my life is punctuated with bitter experiences involving members of different Islamic movements making mountains of controversies out of nothingness. These range from a self-acclaimed ‘Salafi’ who queried my saying the teslim to a ‘Tijaniyyah’ to one expending tons of energy in an attempt to convince me not to attend a public lecture organized by the Muslim Congress (TMC) on Islamic Banking.

It’s particularly worrying that many Muslims today are in ideological crisis and can’t make a distinction between obvious areas of agreement and areas of divergence. Even if we assume the person above has legitimate issues against the ideology or methodology of the TMC, how on earth could such justify his boycotting and blackmailing a public lecture on an issue that affects all Muslims in common? For these Muslims, it’s OK if one associates and cooperates with non-Muslim outfits than with those under the control of Muslims they disagree with on the slightest issues.

2.2: Declining public image of Islam

Muslims are daily blackmailed and Islam portrayed as a violent religion established by the naked force of the sword. There are many propagandists painting the image that the Prophet spread the message of Islam holding the Qur'an in one hand and the sword in the other, and slicing the throat of anyone who would refuse to accept his message.

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5 Prominent among those who have championed this cause of calumny are Islamophobes like Pamela Geller of the Atlas Shrugs, Robert Spencer, Eliana Benador, Brigitte Gabriel and David Yerushalmi. For instance, Kheuman and Leister in their “History of France”, a book for primary school pupils wrote in pp. 80-81: “Those Arabs have forced
Also, the criminal activities of groups like the Boko Haram under the guise of religion have worsened Muslim-Christian relations in Nigeria and fuelled undue generalizations that Islam supports violence or that Muslims are ‘terrorists’. Many Muslims have been indiscriminately arrested or assassinated for no offence than that they wear beards or keep their trousers from sweeping the floor. Eseoghene Al-Faruq Ohwojeheri was right when he observed that: “Today if I go to Maiduguri and with a broad smile on my face and face the JTF and shout ‘Allahu Akbar’ I will be shot dead.”

There is an army of non-Muslims always ready to assign derogatory titles to any Muslim who says the Islamic position on things without compromise. A Muslim cannot say he wants Shariah or ask the government to allow Muslim women wear hijab without being called an extremist or accused of supporting violence. This challenge is gory, with the heavy burden that a Muslim either acts like a Christian or he is called an “extremist”.

people to join the religion. They said to them; join Islam or you will be killed, whereas Christ’s followers won souls by their righteousness and steady love.” In the same vein, “Islam Watch” asserts that “terrorism ... is the real Islam.”


For instance, while defending Nasir El Rufai against allegations of religious bigotry leveled against him recently, Pastor Tunde Bakare said “El Rufai cannot be classified as a religious bigot by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) since the former minister has worshiped many times at his church.” See: <http://www.ynaija.com/nasir-elrufai-cannot-be-a-religious-bigot-because-he-worships-in-my-church-tunde-bakare-fires-back-at-can/> accessed on 19 July, 2013.
2.3: Want of Muslim institutions and professionals, and denial of Muslims’ rights

The Nigerian Muslim community lacks many basic needs: Muslim hospitals, adequate standard Muslim schools and availability of the Qur’an and books of ahadith in local Nigerian languages. In public and private schools from the primary level to the tertiary institutions, there is a progressive decline in the number of Muslim students. In the North, there are some 10 million almajiris, wandering the streets for alms.  

In Nigeria today, only 3 Universities – Al-Hikma University, Fountain University and Crescent University are Muslim Universities – while the Christians have well over 10. At the secondary school level, there are few Muslim schools and even these are mostly of low quality such that many Muslims still prefer that their children go to Catholic schools.

In his book, Agenda For Muslims, Abu Umar Al-Faruqi lamented the ineptitude of Muslims in high places. Among lawyers, medical doctors, skilled engineers, academics and bigwig media practitioners, the Muslims constitute a tiny proportion. By the reverse, names like “Abdur-Razaq,” “Yekini,” “Habeeb,” etc, populate the garages, gambling centres, brothels, club houses and the ranks of messengers.

Some of the consequences are that males still take birth delivery of Muslim women, Muslim kids attend Catholic schools, many Muslim girls have to choose between schooling and their hijab.

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10 The recent case in Lagos State and the ocean of controversies that trailed it is still fresh in mind. In his paper, Oba comprehensively examines this flagrant denial of the basic right of the Muslim woman to cover herself and observes
and some Muslim professionals are denied basic rights like keeping the beards,\textsuperscript{11} wearing the hijab\textsuperscript{12} and taking a short time off work to pray the obligatory salat. Also, the application of the Shariah has been restricted to Islamic personal Law issues like marriage, divorce and inheritance.

3.0: PROSPECTS OF ISLAM IN NIGERIA

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Of every 5 human beings, one is a Muslim. In Nigeria, the Muslims constitute a majority, being 50\% of the nation’s population while the Christians and traditional worshippers respectively constitute 40\% and 10\%. Our large number can become our greatest strength if we are united and work with a clear vision towards the attainment of shared goals and under the aegis of a visionary leadership. We can provide guidance and a sense of direction to the sinking Nigerian ship if we will wake up from our slumber and practice and preach Islam with formidable team spirit. Allah says of the Muslims: “\textit{You are the best nation ever raised for mankind …}”\textsuperscript{13}

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\textsuperscript{11} This is the case for instance with respect to police officers and military personnel.

\textsuperscript{12} An example is the case of Muslims working in the banks and other financial institutions.

\textsuperscript{13} Qur’an 3:110.
If we are to recover our lost glory, it is we who must decide, it is we who must act as “*Allah will not change the fate of a nation unless they change what is in their hearts.*”\(^{14}\) That change of status quo must be brought about by the NSCIA.

### 4.0: THE ROLES OF THE NSCIA

As stated on its website, the NSCIA was established “*to cater for; preserve, protect, promote and advance the interests of Islam and the Muslims throughout Nigeria.*” Some of the roles it should play therefore include:

#### 4.1: Fostering unity among the Muslims

Without doubt, the NSCIA is the umbrella body representing the Nigerian Muslim Community. It has and continues to provide leadership and inspiration to the Muslims, young and old, in Nigeria. For instance, the frenzy controversies that often trail the sighting of moon at the commencement of Ramadan were minimized this year by efforts made through the moon sighting committee installed by the NSCIA. Specifically, Prof. Is-haq Oloyede, the Secretary-General of the NSCIA, appeared on NTA network news on Monday, 8th July to announce that the new moon has not been sighted, so that fasting would not commence till Wednesday, the 10th of July.

Appreciable progress has been recorded. But there is still much room for improvements. In 2011 while working on my series for IslamOnline about the proliferation of Islamic movements in

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\(^{14}\)Qur’an 13:11.
Nigeria,\textsuperscript{15} I conducted a phone interview with Dr. Abdul Lateef Adegbite of blessed memory. He said the NSCIA had plans to stage a conference to bring together Islamic organizations in Nigeria and make concerted efforts to harmonize some of them and identify agreeable areas for improved synergy. Till date, no such conference has been held, nor was any of such ever held.

4.2: Advocacy and mentoring for Muslims

The NSCIA needs to be at the fore front of advocacy for the rights of the Muslims and providing a clearly defined direction for the \textit{Ummah} through mentoring. At the moment, groups like the Muslim Public Affairs Centre (MPAC), the Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) and the TMC are doing well to fill this void. The MPAC for instance publishes Hijab Brochure, Ramadan Brochure, holds an Annual National Convention, publishes press releases, advocates respect for Muslims’ rights\textsuperscript{16} and campaigns for assistance of poor or sick Muslims.

But one challenge that limits their reach and impact is lack of general acceptability of these organizations to all Muslims. Some see these organizations as sectarian or as tilting towards a particular ideological camp. Even if these views are far from accurate; that some Muslims hold them is a reality.

If the NSCIA, which is less likely to be seen as sectarian, assumes these roles (without these organizations stopping their own works of course), I believe improved progress would be made.

\textsuperscript{15} See footnote 3 above.

\textsuperscript{16} A recent case is its advocacy for Muslims students of the River State University of Science and Technology (RSUST) whose only mosques – a makeshift structure – was demolished by the University authority without justification.
To facilitate a robust discharge of this role, the NSCIA needs to improve its presence, especially on the Internet which is where most Nigerians spend the most of their time now. Just two days before the commencement of this year’s Ramadan, a friend observed that the Sultan who is the President of the NSCIA does not have a Facebook page. Neither does the NSCIA. For proper outreach, I suggest the NSCIA should have a Facebook page, a twitter handle, a TV station and a radio station.

4.3: Establishment of Muslim institutions

The grave consequences of having too few or no Muslim hospitals, schools, libraries, mosques, research institutes and the Qur’an in local Nigerian languages currently stare us in the face. The NSCIA should step in to fill these voids. Wealthy Muslims should be mobilized and motivated to provide sponsorship for implementation of projects which will solve these challenges.

4.4: Crises management

The NSCIA is currently playing an almost insignificant role in managing crises like the almajiri problem and the Boko Haram insurgency. Efforts like the Sekhina Projects of the MPAC should be replicated and improved by the NSCIA.

5.0: CONCLUSION

Challenges are a natural concomitant of every existence. Identifying them and charting workable solutions to combat them are important steps this article has carried out. The NSCIA should fully assume its rightful role of providing a direction for the Nigerian Muslims and the Nigeria nation.
Further, the complexity and diversity of challenges facing the Muslims in Nigeria are such that the NSCIA cannot single handedly shoulder. To successfully combat these problems, all stakeholders must play meaningful complementary roles. The Prophet said: “All of you are shepherds and shall be called upon to account on his flock.”17 The supports of the home and the mosque, the cooperation of Islamic organizations and efforts of Muslim individuals are all required to make the roles of the NSCIA impactful.

17 Reported by Bukhari.
6.0: BIBLIOGRAPHY


7. IslamOnline, Qatar (now defunct): <http://www.islamonline.net/eng/.


