

The Rhetorics and Politics of Religion in the Central African Republic: An Early Warning for Nigeria

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Abstract. Religion remains a problematic issue in the political and democratic trajectory in the African continent. The challenges associated with the role and status of religion in the secular state model in most African countries is not debatable. Ethno-political and religious conflicts have developed into prolonged crises in many countries on the continent with the consequence of a backlash of the slow pace of socio-economic development, resulting in untold hardship and astronomical penury. This paper adopts the qualitative method of data collection; hence the information contained in this research are gathered mainly from secondary sources. The article reveals that religion is the fulcrum upon which the conflict in the Central African Republic is escalating. The paper identifies the anarchical situation in the Central African Republic as a lesson for Nigeria. In comparing the Central African Republic case to that of Nigeria, the article recommends that Nigeria needs to be cautious in handling religious issues to prevent it from sliding into disintegration.

Keywords: Militias, Conflicts, Religion, Tradition, Politics, Rebels, Military.

1. Introduction

In Africa and the world over, religion and politics have generated so much controversy regarding how the state should handle them as they have created intense moments in the political and socio-economic development of the African continent. While the undeniable nexus between the two phenomena remains evident, Afolabi (2015: 42-49) reveals that the actual role or influence of one over the other remains debatable. African political leaders claim that these states are secular, but in reality, it is not so.

If this situation is the norm, it poses a significant problem for both religion and politics. In either of the cases, religion or politics serves either as a maid or master or vice versa. Ogundiya (2010:242-248) holds that religion can influence politics in three ways. Firstly, “that religion could influence politics if religious men directly get involved in politics. Secondly, if the two phenomena (religion and politics) fused as one in running the state; and thirdly, if the state subjects government or politics to the laws or doctrine of faith, which renders governance in line with religious doctrine or regulations

In Nigeria, the leaders do not behave according to the tenant of secularity, as reflected in the constitution. On the other hand, religious fundamentalism continues to rage and has created severe insecurity as governance became precarious. The experience in the transaction of politics in Africa demonstrates that religion and politics are inseparable. The central issue explored to escalate the turmoil in the Central African Republic (C.A.R.) is religion. Religion started the imbroglio currently raging in the C.A.R. beginning in 2012. It was triggered by Seleka's rebellion and perpetuated by the Anti-Balaka militia. They hide under the two opposing faiths of Islam and Christianity to carry out their nefarious activities. To score some political and economic goals and secure or maintain power in the C.A.R., the elites behind the two armed groups broadly manipulated religion to control the nation's wealth and natural resources and achieved some personal gains (Deiros, 2014).

This paper argues that the link between religion and politics is an indisputable conduit explored by the elites to foment trouble on the continent of Africa. It

examines the capacity of religion in escalating or de-escalating political violence in Africa, with particular emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria had been entangled in religious imbroglios even before independence; but it should learn from the situation in the C.A.R. before slipping into anarchy. It advocates the separation of politics and religion to enhance the peaceful coexistence of the African people.

2. Understanding the Concept of Religion

There is no concise definition of religion, as many scholars have postulated several meanings of it. For instance, Oládótun et al (2016) opines that religion is a complex topic to handle, whether it considers its connotation, origin, or definition. Since the dawn of his creation, man has remained attached to religion in whatever forms he has beliefs. Afolabi (2015) asserts that religion is a way of life for people, including their traditions and social interaction. It is a fundamental human attitude in life. Molner and Hinze, (2021:135–136) recognizes the multi-nature and functions of religion and thus defines it as a "system of beliefs and practices" within which a group of people interpret and respond to what they feel is sacred and supernatural elsewhere.

Religion is sacred. However, the sacredness is relative, in the sense that it is the people who give or identify the sanctity of something, which can be an object or a person. That is to say, it is the people who make things or persons sacred. Durkheim (1995) sees religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to holy things that unite people into one moral community called a "Church". Therefore, it is remarkable to observe that religion implicates faith and symbols and, particularly, symbolic actions. Geertz (1973) observed that religious symbolism is in its power and ability to influence how people comprehend their position and place in the world and also to impart meaning to the actions they undertake. Geertz further noticed that this symbolism is more common in the African Traditional religions, traditional Christian denominations, oriental religions, where most religious beliefs and practices show through rites and rituals.

In addition to this is the ability of religion "to draw distinctions between forms of space and belief and more mundane, or profane, domains of 'worldly' human endeavour" (Dudley, 1976). The tendency is to make a religion a distinct category or sphere of human activity as explicitly reflected in Western worldview and historical tradition. As Asad (1993:4) rightly noted, in many other cultures and societies,

the distinction "between religion and other spheres of life such as politics, culture, society and economics" is quite unclear or even reasonable. However, this article assumed religion as beliefs of individuals and groups who base their identities and ethics partially or wholly on that set of ideas; and traditionally create the world, including the order of their life within it.

3. Religion and Politics in Africa

African leaders have used religion to gain and acquire political power. Such manipulation of religion has been principally the root cause of most political instability in the continent. It is a form of neo-colonialism after the demise of Western colonialism and imperialism in the continent. For instance, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria pre-supposes everybody has the freedom to practise a religion of their choice without interference from any group, individuals or government. This constitutional provision puts nobody in doubt that Nigeria is a secular state. In the supreme law of Nigeria, secularism is a legal position asserting that public and governmental decisions should not be at the instance of religious influence. In other words, secularism annotates a situation in the constitution, separating political belief from that of religion and the state. Religion should be a service and worship of God or gods as people should practise whatever they believe as their religion. The government public policies and pronouncements should reflect it and be free and segregated from religious influence.

However, religious conflict has long been part of Nigeria's political development. While Nigeria was still under British rule, Islamic law (Sharia) formed part of the country's legal system. One of the Nigerian civil war triggers of 1967 to 1970 was religious intolerance when in the northern part of the country, non-Muslims, especially the Igbos, were slaughtered in their thousands before the situation resulted in a full-blown war. Hackett (2011:5) laments that individual stakeholders have with impunity transformed Nigeria from a model of the relative peace-loving state devoid of religious rancour to a country reputed for repeated outbreaks of an orgy of religious violence arising from manipulation of religion for personal, ethical and sectional gains. The government violated the country's secularism by its attempt to infuse a federal Shari'a Court of appeal in the 1979 Constitution and the unannounced efforts to enlist Nigeria as a member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (O.I.C.) in 1986, which analysts saw as conspiracy theories of Muslim domination of the Christian segment of the society. Furthermore, successive

governments have bastardized Nigeria secularism by embarking on the politicization of religion, thereby fanning the embers of internal implosion, which has variously threatened the fabric of the collective existence of Nigeria in its post-colonial experiment.

Earlier, before independence, the unhealthy rivalry among the political leaders did not spare religion. For instance, Ahmadu Bello (a Muslim) led the Northern Nigeria government in April 1958 to set up a Pilgrimage Board exclusively for Muslims. Paradoxically, Obafemi Awolowo, a Christian from the south in May 1958, set up a pilgrimage board for Muslims in Western Nigeria (Ajayi, 2009). According to Ali-Agan and Olademo (2016:193), "it was Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a Christian, who established Muslims Pilgrimage Board in the then Western Region of Nigeria" to cater primarily for the Muslims in Western Nigeria in 1958. It was evident from the actions of these two personalities that the Muslim leaders who have consistently been privileged to rule parts of the country have been discriminatory and given room for religious narrowness, animosity, and hatred among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. We also need to be aware that this attitude of the Northern political leaders has encouraged the followers to act with impunity against their fellow Christians. Therefore, Ngwoke (1996) described the government involvement in religious matters as blatant and defiant favouritism for the Muslims and viewed Nigerian government patronage of the Muslim community against the Christians as discrimination that can only engender disharmony among the people of different beliefs.

Religious woes in the country have primarily resulted from the two popular regions - Islam and Christianity. These two have contributed immensely to the spiritual setback that the country has witnessed. At any opportunity avails, leaders position themselves for destructive functions rather than for transformative purposes in the citizenry collective interest and country development. In their quest for power, prestige, and materialism, some religious leaders undermine their callings as representatives of God. From experience, it is evident that some men of God, without regard to their integrity and confidence, repose in them, pronounce blessings on people morally bankrupt such as armed robbers, kidnappers and even corrupt politicians before going for their ignoble operations. Pastors share the booties of nefarious activities with gang leaders (Oderinde, 2013). At the same time, without respect for themselves and the institutions they represent, traditional rulers dole out prestigious chieftaincy

titles to the people of the underworld, ignoring the source/s of their wealth.

The situation in Nigeria is similar to the current imbroglio in CAR. The CAR situation is significantly one religious community against another. It is fundamentally challenging to make sense of it. However, any form of atrocities committed against another group is disgusting and needs the most vigorous condemnation possible.

Development in the Central African Republic (CAR) since its independence from France in 1960 has been replete with conflicts. According to International Crisis Group (2007), "the Central African Republic is if anything worse than a failed state: it has become virtually a phantom state, lacking any meaningful institutional capacity at least since the fall of Emperor Bokassa in 1979." The fundamental civil liberties and political rights have been significantly underdeveloped due to the volatile nature of CAR's post-colonial political system.

In addition, due to recurrent military takeovers of power, CAR has also been afflicted with chronic instability and alleged sectarian exclusion and marginalization. Simultaneously, various rebel groups have taken up arms against the central government and turned to insurgency (Petri, 2016). France, CAR's former colonial master, still plays a significant role in its internal affairs due to instability in the country and its successive governments' weakness and lack of legitimacy. (International Crisis Group, 2014). French has had military interventions in CAR, supporting the governments of the day and protecting its nationals and foreigners living in the CAR. The various armed groups involved in the upheavals in the country have asserted that they had been motivated to root out corruption or ethnic or religious discrimination. It is, however, difficult to phantom this because they have rendered the country worse than they met it. Instead of improving the situation, the desire to gain material rewards and political power and patronage and corruption opportunities have dominated their minds (International Crisis Group, 2014). The recurrent pattern of conflict and crises has turned CAR into an archetypal failed state.

Petri (2016) noted that the Seleka forces committed grievous atrocities, mostly against Christians. The resultant action led to the creation of the anti-Balaka militia. Even though the anti-Balaka militias call themselves Christians and fought to preserve and protect fellow Christians, their fight was not religious but essentially political. Moreover, the Christian

majority and Christian leaders in CAR have officially and vehemently denounced the anti-Balaka violence. The Christians also suffered from anti-Balaka violence as many dares speak out against the anti-Balaka.

4. Understanding Religion and Politics in Nigeria

Religion has long formed one of the significant sources of conflict in Nigerian politics and public life. The seed of irrationality and misunderstanding planted by the colonial administrators before independence has gradually grown into a monster threatening the fabric of peaceful coexistence in the country. In the 1950s, the British incorporated Islamic law (Sharia) into the Nigerian legal system. In the late 1960s, religion became a factor in the internal conflict that eventually culminated in the Nigeria-Biafra war from 1967 to 1970 (Afolabi, (2015). Over 600,000 people died during the war. Despite the declaration of no victor, no vanquished by the then Nigerian Head of State (General Gowon), the foreign missionaries working in the former Biafran enclave had no option but to leave the country. At the same time, all the mission schools were confiscated and taken over by the government (Waters 2004). The church immediately turned to an opposition vanguard against the government. Other measures embarked upon targeted against Christians by the Federal Government include introducing the Federal character in the civil service appointment, which automatically reduces the number of Christians in the public service. Other measures include introduction of a quota system in the admission process into tertiary institutions, which adversely affected and robbed qualified candidates among the Christians. Since the mid-1980s, however, the tension between Christians and Muslims has become a constant feature of Nigerian politics.

The reaction of the northern political leaders towards this development strengthened the consciousness of the Christians for greater involvement in politics. Christians became aware of the inspiration and support that Islam provided for Muslim faithful and politicians and strived to entrench such among Christian politicians (Enwerem, 1995). In 1986, the then Muslim military ruler General Babangida surreptitiously took Nigeria into membership of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (O.I.C.), which attracted an immediate outcry from opposition Christian quarters (Magbadelo (2003:64-88). In response, Nigerian Christians pushed to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel in the early 1990s.

The role of religion became more ferocious after the successful election and handing over of government by the former military Head-of-State, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, to the then democratically elected President, Olusegun Obasanjo. Incidentally, the two presidential contestants, Obasanjo and Olu Falae, were Yorubas (from the southwest) and Christians. The insinuation was that the Muslims Northerners had been ruling for several years as military Heads-of-State; hence, it was time for a southern Christian to take over the mantle of leadership. Though the choice of Obasanjo was more ethnic than religious, religion was considered a significant factor in deciding/voting for contestants to the presidency. This stand is a negation of Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which states that "the government of the federation or the state shall not adopt any religion as the state religion" (The Nigerian 1999 Constitution).

It was somehow intriguing that with the coming of democracy in the Fourth Republic, religion became a potent political weapon under which politicians hide to convince and confuse Nigerians to accept them. The Obasanjo Presidency in 1999 witnessed an unprecedented return of religious debate, especially on the issue of Sharia law. The understanding was that his presidency was to recompense to pay back to the North for totally supporting him during the 1999 election. Kukah in Afolabi (2015) observed that many Muslims of southern extraction became aware of Sharia for the first time in 1979 during the debate on the draft constitution as members stumbled on a document stating the following, that:

- "1. There shall be a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal, which shall be an intermediate Court of Appeal between the states Sharia Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Nigeria.*
- 2. The court shall be composed of a Grand Mufti and whatever number of Muftis (not less than three) the National Assembly shall prescribe.*
- 3. There shall be in all states of the Federation a Sharia Court of Appeal established by the constitution"* (Afolabi, 2015).

The situation ignited the curiosity of the Christians in the National Assembly and, therefore, formed a united front to stand against the endorsement of Shari'a law. In the same vein, the Muslim members were adamant and refused to yield ground to see Shari'a becoming a law. After many face-offs between Christians and Muslims, a sub-committee was set up to negotiate the way out. The sub-committee fathomed a draft proposal for the members to consider. The draft was accepted and duly inserted in the proposed constitution but not

without a caveat of not admitting a separate Federal Shari'a Court of Appeal to avoid duplication or paralleling the role of the Supreme Court. Instead, the Supreme Court should comprise some members learned in Islamic law to hear appeals from State Shari'a Courts of Appeal (Afolabi, 2015).

The proposal seemed acceptable to the members initially; subsequent events revealed that religion had penetrated Nigerian politics deeper than had hitherto envisaged in the country's political development. Therefore, at any opportunity, both Christians and Muslims push forward, entrench and consider the interest of their religion first and well above the country's benefit. They, therefore, embarked on spurious activities and power play to outshine themselves to the detriment of the wellbeing of the country and its citizens. At any opportunity, the leaders of the two religions - Christianity and Islam have sought socio-political relevance, justification, and control of the political landscape of Nigeria to their advantage. The aftermath of this power play in governance affairs has been adverse consequences on the economic and political development of the country. Instead of advancement, it has promoted socio-religious and political crises in contemporary Nigerian society.

5. An Overview of the Political Conflict in the Central African Republic

A rebellion known as the Central African Republic Bush War took place between 2004–2007 by the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) in North-Eastern C.A.R., led by Michel Djotodia, following François Bozizé seizing power in 2003 (Siradağ, 2016). The rebellion escalated into significant violence, during which the UFDR rebel forces, alongside several other rebel groups located in other parts of the country, concurrently fought the C.A.R. government. The forces that fought the government included the Groupe d'action patriotique pour la libération de Centrafrique (GAPLC); the People's Army for the Restoration of Democracy (APRD); the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP); the Front démocratique Centrafricain (FDC) and the Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice (MLCJ) (Tomolya, 2014:457–476). The peace agreement between the government and the UFDR was signed in Birao on April 3, 2007, (Birao Peace Agreement, 2007) while further negotiations did not yield to the expected agreement for reconciliation in 2008 but resulted in the formation of a new unity government in January 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2010). François Bozizé, the President whose regime was ousted by a

coalition of rebel groups on March 24, 2013, had been in power for ten years. Bozizé was also a former Chief of Staff as well as Jean-Bedel Bokassa's aide de camp. François Bozizé's rise to power was astutely supported by the Chadian regime of President Idriss Deby, with the blessing of French President Jacques Chirac. He assumed control through a relatively bloodless coup.

Bozizé headed an inclusive government in which the government, armed rebel groups, civil society and political opposition participated. What led to the government collapse despite the commitment to forming an inclusive government was Bozizé's lack of trust in the process, which led to the end of the dialogue. Bozizé's ten years reign was characterized by nepotism. He consistently positioned people from his Gbaya tribe and family members in juicy positions of power while gradually sidetracking others, including future Séléka leaders from this inner circle (Ngoupana and Bate, 2013). The ill feelings and hostility generated by the Séléka's rebellion which ousted President François Bozizé in March 2013, were palpable in the public domain. In addition, the grossly manipulated 2011 election which galvanized the rebel movements from both the marginalized North-East and North-West to form the Seleka Coalition eventually removed Bozizé from power.

Bozizé was not oblivious of the imminent collapse of his government as he embarked on damage control of institutionalizing a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (D.D.R.) settlement procedure with the groups of the historically impoverished and under-governed northeast. This process came out in the 2007 Birao Peace Agreement (Pambazuka News, 2018/2019). Even though the process met the great enthusiasm of the opponents, Bozizé's failure to implement its recommendations led to the disillusionment of many members of the group and, in 2012, began an organized rebellion. Among those who joined the revolution were prominent officials under Bozizé, many former politicians such as Michel Djotodia and Firmin Findiro, alienated by the President's increasing nepotism and paranoia. The current conflict in C.A.R. is seemingly a religious conflict between the primarily Muslim Séléka and Christian Anti-Balaka (Reports of U.S. Department of State on the Central African Republic, 2014).

In other words, the involvement and neutrality of the state's forces have been minimal due to the country's failing political infrastructure; it reflects the dynamics of the situation on the ground. The military and the police were not only overwhelmed and

under-resourced but highly undisciplined and polarized along the party line. Prominent among the group that rebelled against Bozizé's government were the "Convention des Patriotes pour la justice et la Paix" (CPJP) and "Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement" (UFDR). The convenience alliance of the two groups eventually rallied under Djotodia to form the predominantly -Muslim "Séléka." The Séléka was swift and by December 2012 had reached, attacked and captured the capital, Bangui; killing many people, including 13 South African soldiers ending the reign of Bozizé. Although there were intermittent halts in the fight against the government of François Bozizé, the Séléka alliance eventually took over the capital, Bangui, leading to Bozizé fleeing the country.

Seleka then claimed control of the government. Seleka's actions received widespread condemnation by the international community, which led the African Union to suspend the country from the organization and imposed sanctions on rebel leaders. Michel Djotodia, one of the group leaders, claimed to be the de facto head of state initially promised to uphold the terms of the January power-sharing agreement but later reneged and announced the suspension of the constitution, dissolving the government and the National Assembly. The opposition initially rejected the leader's (Djotodia) attempt to form a transitional government and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), otherwise known in French as CEEAC. The opposition and ECCAS instead called for an interim national council to administer the country until holding elections. Djotodia's acceptance of ECCAS's recommendations paved the way for his election as President and head of the interim National Council of state inaugurated on August 18, 2013. Djotodia and other Seleka leaders launched their uprising to pursue their interest to gain access by the northern peoples to resource wealth, mainly the oil exploited in their north homeland by the China National Petroleum Corporation. To a certain extent, this particular overzealous interest rendered Djotodia's authority ineffective as a national leader because of biases towards other ethnic groups, which further compounded the already terrible problem.

It was, therefore, not surprising that the transitional government headed by Michel Djotodia slid into heresy because of its characterized widespread looting, raping, and killings by Séléka militants. The interim government attempted to salvage the situation to perform the normal functions of the state. However, it was unable to fulfil the requirements of an efficient state under the condition of instability

created by the Séléka militias (Bordás, 2012). Djotodia, therefore, eventually disbanded the Séléka movement and set up a transitional parliament in August 2013 to stem the untoward behaviour by Séléka militants to pave the way for a process to return the country to democratic rule. Unfortunately, this did not go down well with Séléka militants, who continued stealing and killing indiscriminately, engaging in horrific acts of violence, rape, and kidnapping, pillaging parts of the country.

This fractured social/political landscape has created deep distrust between the Muslim and Christian communities and between the general and central governments. The lack of government presence and investment in the North adds to the narrative that the government was not interested in the northern Muslims who already shared more significant social connections with communities in Chad and Sudan. This suspicion encouraged opposition against Muslim Central Africans by Christian Central Africans. They believed that Muslim Séléka forces, supported by foreign powers, were out to "Islamize" the Central African society. Imbuing this belief was a radio broadcast in which Séléka forces warned Christian citizens in 2013 that "the Wahhabists are coming" and that they were "waging jihad" (Knoope, & Buchanan-Clarke)".

The immediate reaction of the primarily Christian civilian population was to start forming militias, known as "anti-balaka" or Sango, anti-machete, to counter Séléka forces and protect themselves against the humiliation by mainly Muslim rebels. The reaction of the Christians, in turn, degenerated into a cycle of violent attacks between Muslims and Christian groups, which left hundreds of civilian populations dead and thousands displaced. Analysts warned of the potential degeneration of the situation into genocide, except something was done to enhance the orgy of the violence raging at that time. This situation led to forming a militia, known as "anti-Balaka" (anti-machete), to protect themselves against the Muslim rebels. The action, in turn, degenerated into a cycle of violent attacks between the two religious cults. Many Christians and Muslim civilians lost their lives while thousands were displaced (Lewis, 2014).

The unabated carnage and somehow the anarchical situation created by the Séléka militants that followed the installation of Djotodia caused this reprisal action from predominantly Christian groups within C.A.R. who organized local self-defence militias, labelling themselves "anti-Balaka" (anti-machete) groups. They believed that the Muslim Séléka militias deliberately targeted them for elimination. As a result

of the violence and chaos, Djotodia was forced to abdicate power in January 2014. Catherine Samba-Panza took over as the interim President (B.B.C., (2014). The retreat of the Séléka rebels did not deter the anti-Balaka militants from continuous pillaging and engaging in horrific acts of violence committing atrocities against Muslims in the centre-west of the country. They continued to beat and kill any pocket of suspected Muslims, looting abandoned houses and burning mosques. They employed foul language to anger further their opponents in their propaganda, including infamously raping, public lynching, mutilation, and even cannibalism (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Over 80% of the Muslim population fled their homes in the capital, Bangui, and over 100,000 also fled Christian-dominated areas. The continuing orgy of violence and reprisal segregated Bangui between Muslim and Christian communities. It led to a massive exodus of the Muslims of C.A.R., in what many observers labelled ethnic cleansing (Assessment Capacities Project 2014). France deployed about 142,000 troops while A.U. deployed 6,000 African Union (MISCA) troops in late 2013 to restore peace. They were, nonetheless, unable to stop the sectarian violence. Recognizing this, the E.U. agreed to deploy up to 1,000 troops to Bangui, and the U.N. authorized the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSCA) in the Central African Republic - a force of 12,000 to be deployed in September 2014. Unfortunately, MINUSCA remained critically handicapped on both funding and troop contributions (Better World Campaign, 2014).

6. Elite Manipulation of Religious Identities in the Central African Republic

The Seleka's march to Bangui in December 2012 ignited the underlying fear of a Muslim threat by Bozizé and his group. They adopted a religious strategy to get to power, knowing that religion is a potent catalyst to regenerate general instability. It reminded the anti-Balaka's that the Seleka's were out to fight against the "Muslim invaders." This populist anti-Muslim discourse did not in any way provide an outlet for resolving the tensions; instead, it escalated it. The atrocious activities of Seleka during the 2013 upheaval created a fertile ground for the seed of religious hatred, provoking the emergence of the anti-Balaka self-defence. The anti-Balaka group is a popular movement group formed to counter and reject the Seleka movement hailing from the north-western Ouham and Ouham-Pende. Initially, a self-defence movement later transformed and took up

arms and retook Bangui with the support of the military.

Recall that the Seleka group ousted President François Bozizé, the elite Presidential Guard who remained loyal to Bozizé who joined the anti-balaka militias with members of the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) in fighting against the Seleka, providing the armies with military expertise and weapons. Armed with AK-47s, grenades, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, the anti-Balaka fighters, attacked numerous Muslim areas, forcing them to flee. As they drove all the residents of the former Muslim strongholds in Bangui, the anti-balaka militants promised to eliminate any Muslims remaining in the neighbourhoods. This behaviour was considered as ethnic cleansing by the international observers who witnessed it (Amnesty International, 2014).

However, the people perceived that the anti-Balaka movement formulated their objectives in brutal pseudo-religious and nationalist terms differently. The Seleka group and their perceived Muslim supporters forcibly Islamizing the country did not escape the anti-Balaka swords. The fall of Seleka witnessed the non-Muslim majority holding all Muslims responsible for the violence committed under its rule by association. There was a general Muslim community perception of complicity with Seleka that resulted in a wave of anti-Muslim violence, causing a significant population displacement in early 2014 (UNHCR, 2013) which created Muslim enclaves in the western cities. Of course, Muslim herders in western C.A.R. had no option left but to flee to eastern Cameroon. The leftovers of Muslims trapped in the urban enclaves escaped the carnage with the assistance of the U.N. agencies and some African governments such as Senegal and Chad, who evacuated them.

In 2014, Seleka leaders articulated the idea of partitioning the country to enable them to protect Muslims. This suggestion by the Seleka delegation led to the immediate suspension of the Brazzaville negotiations talks in July 2014 and increased their unpopularity. Seleka leaders would not give up as they continued to hide under the pretext of protecting and defending the Muslims' cause to mobilize support and improve their public image (Tomolya, 2004:457-476). The disaster raging in the Central African Republic is not natural or caused by external political forces, but instead human-made and indigenous. The numerous rebel groups competing with the government and each other are not because of ideological differences but due to competition over

natural resources, especially diamond mines and the personal ambitions of their leaders (Tomolya, 2004:457–476). Central Africans and outsiders have portrayed the conflict in the C.A.R. as a Christian/Muslim confrontation. The international media reportage especially, the Al Jazeera headline in July 2015, characterized the conflict as a "religious war" (Cadman, 2015). However, participants in the Bangui workshop agreed to describe the conflict as a "political conflict but coloured with religious dimensions.

Some reported that, in their neighbourhood, the popular perception is a conflict between Christians and Muslims. During these conversations, the term community means the religious community. Two Muslim participants said that Islam was no longer welcome in the C.A.R. and that some people wanted to make the country an Islam-free country. Muslims interviewed in Bangui and Paoua vehemently complained of discrimination against them and that officials in Bangui do not acknowledge this discrimination. For instance, the authorities always deny the narrative of unfairness and marginalization told by Muslims and minimize their demographic importance within the population. This perception among some Muslims of anti-Muslim attitude and discrimination has some evidence to support it. Questioning the size of the country's Muslim community and the nationality of Muslims have become common in public and private discourse. A former minister estimates the Muslim population to be no more than 5 per cent of the community, while an imam estimates Muslims to make up 20 per cent (Conciliation Resources, 2015). The perception of Seleka as "foreigners" – quite familiar among the anti-Balaka led many to question the nationality of Muslims (Glawion, 2015). During the government's public consultations in 2014 and 2015, the communities of Ouham and Ouham-Pende demanded verification of the nationality of Muslims. They embarked on the expulsion of those found to be foreigners. They argued that many Muslims had bought Central African documents from corrupt authorities. The National Transition Council (NTC) initially refused to authorize Central African refugees in neighbouring nations to vote because many such refugees were Muslim. People in Bangui doubted their authentic nationality as Central Africans. The NTC only backed down following pressure from the U.N. and the C.A.R.'s constitutional court, which declared that the Council's actions were unconstitutional. Central African Republic refugees have since been able to vote in presidential elections. Non-Muslims often perceive Muslims to be foreigners resulting in the general attitude resisting

the return of Muslim refugees. They, therefore, imposed a selection procedure on returning refugees based on nationality. The view of non-Muslims towards Muslims continues to fluctuate between hostility and distrust.

7. Lessons for Nigeria from the Conflict in the Central Africa Republic

From the preceding analysis, it is visible that Nigeria and the C.A.R. share some similarities in religious antagonism. In similar circumstances, both countries have experienced upheavals based on religious bigotry, which left on their heels thousands of people dead. Nigeria had been experiencing a mind-boggling ethno-religious dispute even before the civil war broke out in the 1960s. The same scenario has played out in the C.A.R. During the period preceding the civil war in Nigeria, the leadership of the Biafran people felt that their coexistence with the Northern-dominated federal government was no longer tenable. The conflict which resulted from political, economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions preceding the war was palpable with fears. The immediate cause of the Nigerian civil war in 1966 included ethno-religious riots in Northern Nigeria. At its heels was the military coup, a counter-coup leading to persecution of Igbos living in Northern Nigeria. Control over the lucrative oil production in the Niger Delta also played a vital strategic role (Plotnicov, 1971). The scenarios leading to the Nigerian civil war in the 1960s are here playing out again. The Catholic Bishop of Sokoto, Most Rev. Fr. Mathew Kuka, recently captured this appropriately at a colloquium organized by Olusegun Obasanjo Center, the National Open University of Nigeria, discussing farmer/herder imbroglios in many parts of Nigeria. Kuka likened the uproar trailing the farmer/herder imbroglios to what happened to the Igbos that led to the Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970 (Glawion, 2015). Nigerians need to caution themselves now and shelve outrageous statements capable of igniting already heated polity.

In the same vein, the Central African Republic needs to go back to the drawing board and surrender personal interest in building a virile state that caters for its citizenry's security. Both countries, therefore, have many lessons to learn from each other. In Nigeria, most of the political conflicts have worrisome religious undertones. The current Boko Haram insurgency heavily embedded under religious cleavages and should be tackled without politics interest, collectively and holistically. The situation in Nigeria became more disturbing since the advent of

the Fourth Republic; the rate of religious violence has been on the increase. Statistics equally shows that at least 95 per cent of the conflicts emanating from the northern part of the country is attributable to the high rate of poverty, corruption and illiteracy in the region (Ezeanokwasa, 2009). This situation needs redress because a neglected populace portends serious dangers to governance. There is also a sustained culture of mutual suspicion and unhealthy rivalry between the Christians and the Muslims of Nigeria, as was the case between the Saleka north in the C.A.R. and the anti-Balaka Christian group.

The introduction of sections 38 (1) and (10) into the Nigerian Constitution, prohibiting the declaration of a state religion and guaranteeing freedom of religion, is just on paper. It has done little to stem the frequency of religious conflicts in Nigeria. In the central states of Plateau and Benue and northwestern state Kaduna, it is evident that the upheavals reported in these areas resulted from religious intolerance. The position of the Nigerian state has worsened the situation as the state venerates and patronizes the two dominant religious groups instead of postulating policies that can reduce ethno-religious conflicts that have continually escalated tensions and rivalry in the country. Nigerian Christians and Muslims rivalry has often manifested in inter-religious violence. The Boko Haram crisis in north-eastern Nigeria is an example which the government is yet to tackle successfully. Equally, the farmer/herder clashes devastatingly ravaging the country, leading to killings, kidnapping and loss of properties is a pointer to a state of anarchy and need redress immediately. It is, therefore, imperative that the government devises mechanisms to tackle the constant problem of religious violence in Nigeria for it not to degenerate into similar conflict in the central Africa republic, which may render the Nigerian state ungovernable as the case of the Central African Republic.

8. Conclusion

The political conflict in the Central African Republic is problematic and has affected both parties in the battle and rendered the state ungovernable. Heterogeneous and pluralistic societies in Africa, especially Nigeria and the world, have a lot to learn from the conflict in the C.A.R. Constant political violence and clashes between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria will continue to negatively impact the lives of the people and the country's reputation at the international level. The economic growth, socio-political, and socio-economic wellbeing of the country are capable of leading to anarchy and disintegration. Christians and Muslims must learn to

tolerate and respect each other and show some dignity in their relationship and responsibility towards their country. The root causes of violence in the C.A.R. need to be tackled by a joint effort of the international community and the C.A.R. political leaders and surrender personal interest for the country's interest through long-term and sustained initiatives that focus on these causes.

In the northwest of the C.A.R., the crisis revolves around armed groups and perennial conflicts of cattle movements. In the east and centre, rebels are waging guerrilla warfare to control zones of influence and resources. The consequences of embarking on provincial violence portend damning damages that can slide into more uncontrollable severe situations. The rebel groups and local communities are synergizing their activities, leading to reinforcement and increased local militias. It has also made a resurgence of more targeted attacks against Muslim minorities and driving ethnic and religious exclusion, reminiscent of the most tragic events of the country's crisis. In the same vein, the Nigerian situation is quite uncontrollable, as farmers/herders imbroglio has led to more confusion, so kidnapping has become a booming business. The military is overstretched, perhaps that it has so much to cover with little resources. The herders from the north have become arch hill of the central and southern farmers as their animals continue to destroy their farmlands in the name of grazing. The government is not even helping the situation as pronouncements from government quarters do not portray equal treatment. The demand for self-determination by sections of the southern communities has come on the heels of government inconsistency. This kind of situation can degenerate into profound anarchy that may be uncontrollable.

Hate speeches preceding the civil wars in both countries should be discouraged in their polity as a matter of urgency. If they go on uncontrolled, they can spell doom for the corporate existence of both C.A.R. and Nigeria. The government, predominantly the tribal and the cabals employing religion as strategies to get to power in the C.A.R., must recognize that their role can drive the country into anarchy. Efforts towards encouraging policies for reconstruction and avoiding abdicating governance to the international community would be in the right direction. The National Plan for Recovery and Peacebuilding (RCPCA), arising from the 2015 Bangui Forum, a step towards devolving power to empower provincial and local governments, especially those claiming historical marginalization, should be encouraged. Policies of inclusion to reduce suspicion, which potentially deepens religious

cleavages between Muslims and Christian in the C.A.R., should be encouraged. In summary, both countries should place national interest and patriotism above personal aggrandizements by the citizenry of the C.A.R. and Nigeria to foster unity among them.

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