From Islamism to Realpolitik: Islamic Movement of Nigeria’s Paradigm Shift as Checkmate-strategy against Sunni Influence in Nigeria

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to represent the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) as a group which has shifted its paradigm from Islamism to realpolitik as a strategy to check-mate the growing influence of its Sunni counterpart in the competitive Nigerian political arena. This is however to debunk the widely held on conviction by Nigerians including the Nigerian state itself that, the IMN (as it once claimed), is a group which does not recognize the legitimacy, authority and constitution of the Nigerian state and which seeks to achieve political revolution from secular to Islamic political system in Nigeria. Casting IMN in a contrary light, the study uses a combination of interviews and literature review as sources of primary and secondary data respectively, and, Political Process Theory (PPT) as a theoretical guide, to find that the IMN has by way of silent penetration into the Nigerian politics, civil service and governance process, evolved to gradually move away from its earlier position of Islamism perpetrated especially during its earlier periods of Islam Only (IO), in the hope of matching, counterbalancing and check-mating the established influence of its major rival group-the Sunni, which is generally believed to have dominated political affairs and government positions in Nigeria. This gradual paradigm shift strategy or what is referred to in this paper as political Taqiyyah from Islamism to Realpolitik is concluded to be a silent revolutionary strategy embarked by the IMN in view of increasing political relevance, popularity and advantage in the Nigerian competitive political landscape.

Keywords: Islamism, Realpolitik, Political Taqiyyah

INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria from total Islamism to political influence is a realistic agreement with Rubin (2013) where he argued that reality of Islamic Movements in the Middle East is such that due to the competitive nature of their political environments and their inability to capture state power, they have increasingly abandoned their original missions of Islamization of politics in favor of politicization of Islam.

In Nigeria, it is a common fact all over that since the fall out between the two Muslim Students Society’s dominant factions of participative change advocates and anti-participation revolutionaries, in other words reformers and revolutionaries, those who advocated for joining the Nigerian political system to change it have since moved on with active participation in all walks of life in the Nigerian political arena without any reservation-these are later to form larger part of the Nigerian Sunni faction of the MSS, while those who insisted that revolutionizing the system was only possible through struggles independent of the system continued on such notion of non-participative revolution carried on the struggle until certain politicking intercepted their Islamic mission.

These opposing viewpoints have evolved over time to become one of the major bones of contention between the two rival Shi’a and Sunni sects in Nigeria. This way, influence of the Sunni faction continued to grow due to its participation and eventual permeation into the different sectors of the Nigerian politics and economy until when, (as the IMN would insinuate), the Sunni becomes synonymous with the Nigerian state. These accusations and allegations of political romance between the Sunni and the Nigerian state have long manifested themselves in the constant clash between the IMN and the Nigerian state as archetype enemies. Such clashes have at different times triggered securitization moves and decisions and narratives that constantly undermined the easy flourishing and resilience of the IMN to the advantage of its Sunni counterpart. These and many other obvious realities have succeeded in pushing the IMN towards a re-think and paradigm shift of the IMN group towards silent infiltrations into the different sectors of the Nigerian politics.
and economy in quest for increased influence and checkmate of the grown influence of its Sunni rival. This tactical political response of measuring and weighing and calculating of political facts by the IMN came to be a gradual shift of its initial Islamist agenda to silent Moderation based on Realpolitik in the Nigerian political space.

In the beginning, there is no doubt to say with varying degree of intensity though that, the IMN is known since its inception from the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) -MSS days, for its radical proclamations and actions through the period of Islam Only (IO).

The IO period which reigned mainly in the post-Funtua Declaration period had served for the Muslim Brothers' struggles-a turbulent and turning point for many especially those who had hitherto sided and moved on with El-Zakzaky based on his Funtua declaration stand and revolutionary mission. Those few that had stayed had alongside El-Zakzaky absolutely rather than relatively, maintained the position of Islam Only (IO) the Funtua Declaration and this time round a bolder and open intimate relationship with Iranian Islamic Republic (IIR).

Brothers and their intolerant position against not only their Sunni counterparts but also against the Nigerian state. In fact, these unbecoming attitudes and circumstances were according to Last (2013), what provoked various regimes of the Nigerian state thereby triggering violence between the duo and eventual arrests and killings as well as destruction of the properties of the IO members at different encounters.

It is the opinion of many that the IO has been a promising period for the successful radicalization of its new and existing members especially due to the various supports and influence of the IIR which at that material time was its singular vivid role model, influencer, collaborator and supporter. Such was the time when the group members maintained the outright rejection of the Nigerian state and all that it stood for.

The major aim of the movement then, was to stage in Nigeria, Islamic revolution akin to the Iranian Experience. In this very period the Muslim brothers were clearly disowned by some of their erstwhile MSS and IO contemporaries who now mostly toe the Saudi line of Sunni tradition. These Nigerian Sunni being the post-Funtua declaration faction who argued in favor of participative change, have since then moved on to join the Nigerian political system in different capacities especially as their position had tallied with that of another leading Nigerian Sunni Scholar-Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi on the necessity of Muslims to take advantage of participating in various governmental and political affairs and positions in the quest for bringing about Islamic change.

Though until the early stage of the IO, some few (who despite their suspicion of Elzakzaky’s toying the line of the then hated Shi’a path but he constantly denied) had remained with him until when it became obvious that he was rather practicing Taqiyyah, then they left. These were the last group from which the rivalry and gap between the two opposing sects of Shi’a and Sunni in Nigeria kept widening until today. This is therefore the more reason why the subsequent stage of the IO which is Islamic movement, became overly characterized by reactions to the intense political tussle between the Shi’a and Sunni sects at both global and domestic level.

A number of literature on IMN in Nigeria have tried to examine the group and its activities in Nigeria from different angles, these studies have however reserved for this study, the unique gap to examine IMN’s operation in Nigeria from the realistic angle thereby representing the group as one which is caught up in political competition and the inevitable desire to win at all cost.

The oldest study on IMN proper being M.D Suleiman’s classic work: Shiaism and the Islamic Movement in Nigeria 1979-1991 conducted in 1998 has succeeded in portraying IMN and its activities, from a more or less historical angle. The work which took for granted IMN’s evolutionary dynamism from a competitive sense, has paid much attention to the historical and socio-economic dynamics that boosts the group’s activities and membership. But is though understandable to say that the historical background of the author has played a great deal of role in the historical disposition of the work.


**METHODOLOGY**

This paper uses interview and literature review as sources of its primary and secondary data respectively. Below is the interview profile.
Table 1: General Profile of Interview Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>No. OF PERSONS</th>
<th>INTERVIEW INFORMANTS</th>
<th>SECTOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>State Security Service (SSS)</td>
<td>Department of State Security (DSS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nigerian Police Force (NPF)</td>
<td>Internal Affairs Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Security Expert</td>
<td>Public/Private Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sunni (Former Elzakzaky’s MB ally)</td>
<td>Public/Private Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>IMN Resource Persons</td>
<td>Public Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Darul Thaqalain Shi’a faction</td>
<td>Religious/Legal Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mu’assatul Rasul A’azam Shi’a faction</td>
<td>Religious Sector</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s device

**DATA ASNALYSIS**

**The Nature and Character of the Muslim Student Society (MSS) Period**

As a matter of reiteration, it is important to understand that during MSS struggle, was in this period characterized by proclamations that were targeted not exclusively to Sharianization of Nigeria, as it later was the case during the IO period, rather, its threw its weight towards pushing for the inculcating Islamic value reforms amongst the Muslim populace. In this period therefore, what the MSS strugglers hoped for was only a form Islamic driven societal reorientation which they referred to as *Muslim Ummah* rather than total Islamization of the Nigerian state proper.

The tendencies for such Islamic activism at that time was motivated by the writings and activities of the anti-American-anti-West global Islamic environment of scholars, like Hasanul-Banna, Abul Ala-Maududi, Mohammad Iqbal, Sayyid al-Kutub, Sayyid Hawa etc., and as well the eventual coincidental occurrence of Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

During this period, because it was not a period of political activism proper, the most relevant and important yardstick to measure the priorities of the MSS strugglers was their intellectual and educational role models and reference materials and activities. The *magnum opus* which was primarily referred to during this period was Sayyid Qutub’s *Milestone (Ma’alim fi Dariq)*. It was the guiding doctrine of the MSS strugglers relating to the revival and reformati on of ideal Islamic tradition, roles, culture and values and responsibilities of Muslims in the modern age for the purpose of ideological organization.

There were of course other books that had shaped the understanding and perception and belief of the struggle like Abul Ala Maududi’s *Process of Islamic Revolution, etc.*, but since the period was more of a searching process than real defined movement based on certain ideology, the concentration of the MSS strugglers on the *Milestone* was a clear indication to the fact that what they then stood for was not basically Islamic Revolution as a reaction to the Nigerian secular state, rather, if anything, it was revolution of the individual and his society through reorientation and change against the then contemporary global order based on westernization which was all the *Milestone* itself was about. In fact, A.B. al-Mehri has this to say:

Ash-shaheed Sayyid Qutub’s ideas especially mainly in the Milestones were about revolutionary movement aimed at changing the world and bringing in a new ethical moral order based on freedom, brotherhood, and justice for all. Islam stands for change. It seeks to change the individual and the society. This change covers every aspect of human life: form personal morality to business economics and politics

On the other hand, to get the picture clearer, the MSS strugglers never paid much attention to other statist and national issues as against the subsequent periods of IO and IMN. The issues of population census and national I.D card for example were not nonexistent at all; similarly, the question of whether or not to recognize national I.D card was also not an issue then. So also, participation in national elections, national anthem, national flag, public holidays and participation in public service were all non-issues. This is because the MSS struggle then was still very much in its infant stage and could not have been organized well enough to take decisive position on such important and fate deciding national issues in relation to their Islamic ideology.

However, this period continued to become more complex than it started especially when some of the MSS strugglers began to develop the opinion that allegiance to the Nigerian state should be denounced in
favor of Islamic political system, but this opinion was quite minor among the MSS strugglers at the time. But as the MSS continued to gain wider support hence momentum, some of its core leaders like Ibrahim El-Zakzaky began to develop the understanding that the activities of the MSS must never be confined to preaching and teaching, rather it should be encapsulating political actions as reaction to the then prevailing secular Nigerian system. According to Ibrahim A.Z:

...the MSS which could correctly be described as the youth wing of the Jama’atu Nasr al-Islam whose inspirer and guide is Alhaji Abubakar Gumi (Usman, Y.B. 1987:90) was, according to El-Zakzaky, lacking in political vision. The MSS was more concerned with organizing public lectures and annual Islamic vacation course which encouraged Muslim youths all over the country to come together and learn more about Islam. As Suleiman (1997:57) noted, El-Zakzaky was, however, not satisfied with the ostensible lack of political orientation of the MSS.

The eventual manifestation of this tendency itself formally when in 1980 Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky declared during the MSS Islamic Vacation Course (IVC) held at Funtua Katsina State where declared that:

I declare before you, and Allah (Subhanahu wa Ta’ala) is the witness, I indeed have no loyalty to the Nigerian constitution, its laws and leaders! I do not trust any of these!! Instead, I am affirming my faith in Allah, and His laws, and the leadership of the Messenger of Allah (Peace and Blessings be upon him)

This declaration has set the foundation for the subsequent period of Islam Only though with resultant factions and splinter groups. Zollner (2009) opined that the most crucial issue for Islamist movements is the call for the establishment of an Islamic state; this issue is the defining point of their activity. As an immediate succeeding period to MSS, the IO was a period when many of the MSS joined El-Zakzaky in the very much outright rejection of the philosophy, methodology, processes, activities and general secular nature and essence of the Nigerian state. In totality, they did not believe in the supremacy of the Nigerian state and its constitution, national flag, anthem, participation in elections or national census, and in fact western education though with little reservation when it favors certain interest of the movement.

External Influence; Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)

Islamic Republic of Iran’s influence in the IO period was among the major factors of IMN’s paradigm shift. Ideologically speaking, when the journey began in the MSS as Muslim Brotherhood, the books that were being read were typically those of the Sunni tradition or at least were not Shi’a ideology inclined, i.e., Mu’allim fi Darik (Milestone), Ibn Kathir (Quar’anic Translation), Riyadu-ssalihin (Annawawi, Sayyid Hawa’s Jundullah (Thakafatan wa Akhlakan), etc.

But in the IO period, precisely during the Jos convention when all allegations against El-Zakzaky and other fronters, of the agenda for the Shiaization of the IO struggle became clear, these earlier books were properly replaced with pro-Iran Ideological revolutionary books, like Tahrir al-Wasila, Jihad al-Akbar, Arba’una Hadithan (not the popular Arba’una Hadith of Annawawi) and lately, Nahjul-Balaagha etc., all published by Ayatollah Khomeini. According to Doukhan 2016) Zakzaky reportedly sought inspiration from the Iranian revolutionist and leader, the late Ayatollah Khomeini. “Nigeria must become wholly Islamic and Allah proclaimed Lord of the entire nation,” Zakzaky said in 1996 when Nigerians faced repression under military rule.”

But despite all this external influence this study has in spite of different claims by earlier studies on the IMN...
group, has not found any concrete evidence showing the exchange of arms, weapons, and ammunitions or even financial transfers between IIR and the IO struggle.

This IO period lingered up until around the beginning of the millennium when the last batch that fell out with the Shiite group left. This was the period that marked the transformation proper of the IO period to the period of Islamic Movement of Nigeria.

Table 1.0 Showing the periodic distribution of IMN’s positions on issues of national allegiance and patriotism in Nigeria between the span of late 1970s/early 1980s-date.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>Indicators of National Allegiance</th>
<th>Muslim Students Society (MSS) Brotherhood</th>
<th>Islam Only; Post Funtua declaration</th>
<th>Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) Shiites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Elections</td>
<td>No Issue</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>National Population Census</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Western Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Participation in Civil Service &amp; Politics</td>
<td>No Issue</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Loyalty to state, constitution &amp; constituted authorities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>National I.D. Card</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>National Anthem</td>
<td>No Issue</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>National Flag</td>
<td>No Issue</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Public Holidays/Celebrations*</td>
<td>No Issue</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s device from interviews and literature survey data.

THE IMN PERIOD: CONFUSING THE ENEMY STRATEGY (POLITICAL TAQIYYAH)

The whole secret lies in confusing the enemy, so that he cannot fathom our real intent. Sun Tzu, The Art of War. (1910)

During this period, the IMN has already become fully exposed to the Shi’a-Sunni global sectarian warm war which has long taken its toll to have affected and influence the ideology, methodology, processes, motive and strategies of the IMN group. So the IMN’s ascendancy, political inclusion and influence and power continued to be greatly undermined by the growing influence of its Sunni counterpart in the Nigerian political landscape. The Sunnis which are mostly moderate Islamists are very vocal; they have dominated key and important positions in government; they have great deal of influence in elections and government decisions. So like her counterparts in the Middle East as argued by Rubin (2013), the IMN realizing that it has failed to wield or capture political power has resorted to strategizing from Islamism to moderation so that it adapts to the changes and game nature of the Nigerian political environment. The difference however, is that the IMN is re-strategizing not mainly because it has failed to capture political power, rather, because its Sunni rival uses its influence to dominate, undermine, fight, and help government suppress it using different means.

Due therefore to the IMN’s radicalized nature, and civil disobedience of the IMN and in fact the recurring clash between the IMN and security apparatus of the Nigerian state, has made the Nigerian state and yet many Nigerians to believe and reaffirm that the IMN is state within a state and does not recognize the Nigerian state and its constitution and constituted authorities and general statehood as it the group has been claiming in the past.

But far from the reality, the IMN group, by taking advantage of the Nigerian Political Opportunity Structures (POS) to take advantage of weaknesses and failures of the Nigerian state, Mobilizing Structures (MS) to exploit available opportunities in the political system and Framing Processes (FP) to use all its strengths to frame issues and narratives, it has been able to gradually transit and readjust from its hitherto IO position of misrecognition of the Nigerian state and what it stands for. This is mainly by virtue of the group’s silent participation (though with continued outright condemnation), in the political and public affairs of Nigerian state-a position which is out rightly in defiance of the earlier proclamation and position from the Funtua declaration and its aftermath and during the IO period proper, therefore, the IMN group, has obviously shifted its paradigm by adjusting to fit into the Nigerian political landscape and civil arena as a strategy of adaptation and completion survival.

Today, the IMN has many members working in different sectors of the Nigerian public service and politics. Even though due to the Taqiyyah principle of the group’s ideology, except for their black dress color and for the women, distinct Hijab (veil) style which covers their jaw, it is hard to try to give idea of their number and places of work.
But those ones who are known in their various work places are usually cited as participants in the different public activities and outings of the group such as public processions, activities of specialized units of the IMN, meetings, Ta’aleemat (tutorials), whispering campaigns exercises etc. This public service infiltration is a strategy devised by the IMN to increase its influence thereby checkmating the influence and hegemony of its Sunni counterpart. Shia Muslims are present in all strata of the Muslim Unmuh in Nigeria, including the civil service and active in economic trade. Their members are close aides to several politicians. (Doukhan 2016)

In terms of belief in the constitution and its supremacy, the IMN whenever it has issue with the Nigerian state, has always resorted to seeking legal redress in the national and international courts of law, this means that the group believes in the law of the land even if it is for the purpose of taking advantage of it only. Similarly, as there has been overt, unfolding arguments about the anti-state nature of the IMN and its motive of establishing Islamic system in Nigeria. These different interpretations have great deal of connection with the nature, activities and indeed utterances of the group. Notable among these activities are the constant clashes between apparatus of the Nigerian state and the IMN, strange relationship between the IMN and IRI and its proxy armed group-the Hezbollah, civil disobedience of the group as well as its usual provocative utterances against the Nigerian state. All these factors combined are what form the impression about the IMN that the group has nothing to do with participating in political, civil and governmental affairs of the Nigerian state.

But far from being the reality on ground, the IMN is just being strategic by giving one impression while in the real sense it is doing another thing. The IMN while it maintains open criticism and antagonism with the Nigerian state, as well as its continued refusal to identify with such non-issues as national anthem, national flag, or public holidays, the facts of silent infiltration stated above are clear testimonies that the IMN is playing the strategy of confusing the enemy, so that its real intendent of silent revolution as Sun Tzu would argue cannot be fathomed by its common enemies i.e., the Nigerian state and the Sunni sect in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

In sum, it can be clearly seen that rather than the popular belief that the IMN seeks to establish an Islamic system in Nigeria through the process of creating a parallel government, the group’s Islamist motive in its earlier MSS period has been taken over by a realpolitik motive of checkmating the growing influence of the Sunni sect against the declining relevance of the Shi’a-IMN in the Nigerian political landscape. This paradigm shift is observable in the change of attitude of the IMN from disregard and non-participation in government to silent infiltrations into government and political stakes in Nigeria. This Political Taqiyyah of the IMN is a deliberate strategy aimed at confusing the group’s Sunni enemy against detecting its real intent. Similarly, the sudden change in the ideological and strategic stance of the IMN is a partial response to the global Shi’a-Sunni global sectarian cold war and competition led by Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively.

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