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FG should address religious persecution

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Nigeria's increasingly unsavoury global reputation was cemented recently when the United States government "upgraded" it to the list of world's worst persecutors of religion. With this, Nigeria joins a shady club of 10 on the US State Department Countries of Particular Concern list, identified as those "engaged in or tolerating systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom." Beyond the usual reflexive rebuttal, the President, Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd.) and his officials, the governors and their aides, should uphold the country's secularity, protect all citizens and enforce the rule of law dispassionately.

"Religious liberty," said the Cato Institute "is the foundation of the freedom of conscience," noting that repressive regimes are often intent on destroying or co-opting religion. Religious persecution is the systematic mistreatment of a person or group because of their faith or lack of one. Persecution, perpetrated by state and non-state actors, thrives in this country with reckless abandon. Incontestably, the Federal Government has fuelled the impunity by failing to protect vulnerable groups and steer the decision making process away from extreme religiosity. Frustratingly, it fails to punish offenders, including rioters and terrorists.

The US move shows however that while the government persists in denial, the world is watching. The US Commission for International Religious Freedom had in 2019 recommended Nigeria to the Special Watch List, a secondary tier below the CPC of countries "engaged in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom." The "upgrade" puts Nigeria in company with a dreary group: Myanmar (Burma), China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. "Nigeria now has the unfortunate distinction of being the first democracy ever added to the infamous list of the worst religious freedom violators in the world," said the USCIRF. This is shameful.

Abuja's response was predictable. Lai Mohammed, the Minister of Information and Culture, declared, "Nigeria does not engage in religious freedom violation, nor does it have a policy of religious persecution. Victims of insecurity and terrorism in the country are adherents of Christianity, Islam and other religions." His claim that "Nigeria jealously protects religious freedom as enshrined in the country's constitution and takes seriously any infringements in this regard" is laughable.

The US report was however explicit. It cited the ferocious assault on the Shiites' Islamic Movement in Nigeria, whose leader, Ibrahim el-Zakzaky, his wife and others remain in detention since 2015 in defiance of court orders, the numerous attacks on churches and Christians, on mosques and Muslims in parts of the country.

The Buhari regime is particularly insensitive to the country's secularity. Since 2000 when 12 states added criminal law to the jurisdiction of Shari'a (Islamic law) courts, many Northern states are now more Islamic than some Islamic countries in the enforcement of Islamic law on non-Muslims. Routinely, Islamic police destroy bottles of alcoholic beverages seized from supply vehicles of minority Christian shop owners. In 2014, Mubarak Bala was incarcerated in a mental health institution by his family after saying he had lost his belief in God. He was arrested in Kaduna in April 2020 for "blasphemy."

These are clear cases of religious intolerance. Discrimination against anybody in the name of religion should stop. The government should address the agonised concerns of large, alienated segments of the populace. Global rights agencies take into account state actions, persecution by non-state actors and crucially, the institutional response of governments to persecution. The Pew Research Centre identifies restrictions and hostilities to religion to varying levels in 187 countries; some, it says, go to extreme lengths. Nigeria is definitely remiss. The International Crisis Group said the herdsmen-farmers crisis in the North-Central states has a religious hue as the murderous Fulani militants are invariably Muslims who conflate farmers, churches and Christians as existential enemies. This plays to the country's deep sectarian divide where policies and responses are often informed by partisan considerations rather than by law or best practices. Between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians have been killed in the last decade, claims the International Christian Concern. A Kaduna State panel determined that 348 Shiites were massacred by soldiers in Zaria and buried in mass graves in 2015. The Sunni Muslim majority in the North oppresses the Shiites.

The federal and state governments lay the grounds for such outrage by their inordinate promotion of two faiths — Islam and Christianity — at the expense of all others. The declaration of Rivers as a Christian state by Governor Nyesom Wike is typical. Culpably, the Nigerian state tolerates persecution. It often fails to punish those who perpetrate atrocities in the name of religion. Very few of those who murdered 1,202 Christians as estimated by Family Research Council in the first six months of 2020 have been apprehended or prosecuted. The murderers of Grace Ushang, a National Youth Service Corps member, in Borno State; of Gideon Akaluka, beheaded in Kano in 1995; or Eunice Olawale, a mother of seven killed in 2016 for evangelising in Abuja were not punished. Students who lynched their teacher, Oluwatoyin Olusesin, in Gombe in 2007 for allegedly mishandling the Koran walked free. The government is reluctant to prosecute even terrorists, preferring to offer them amnesty under a questionable de-radicalisation scheme.

There should be both institutional and attitudinal change. Already, divisive tendencies, accentuated by Buhari's exclusionary policies, have deepened the country's ethnic, regional and sectarian differences. Appointments must reflect the country's diversity. The unjust sponsoring of Muslim and Christian pilgrimages should end. The Federal Government should step in and stop the impudent assault on people's rights by Hisbah units, forbid Nigeria police from participating in their operations and challenge the constitutionality of dubious religious laws. Sudan and Uzbekistan acted to enshrine religious freedom and end the suffocating chokehold of theocratic penal law and were removed from the SWL.

The worst atrocity to take place in Europe since World War II occurred during a brutal three-year war (1992-1995) following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. The war was fought largely along ethno-religious lines, among predominantly Orthodox Christian Serbs, Muslim Bosnians and Catholic Croats.

The enlightened members of society should stand up firmly against the promotion of religious extremism in the country. Citizens have the right to hold or consider faith, a fact, viewpoint, or thought, independent of others' viewpoints. Therefore, persecution on account of faith or non-faith should be challenged in the courts while civil society groups help the vulnerable with lawsuits and advocacy.