



NIGERIAN MUSLIMS NETWORK

And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allah, and be not disunited

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Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo,
President and Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces of the
Federal Republic of Nigeria,
Aso Rock Presidential Villa,
Abuja, Nigeria.

cc:

The Senate President
The Speaker, National House of Representatives
The Minister of Justice and Attorney General of the Federation
The Minister of Police Affairs
The National Security Adviser
The Chairman Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs
The Chairperson FOMWAN
All Nigerian Muslim Organizations
All daily newspapers in Nigeria

INFRINGEMENT ON THE RIGHTS OF MUSLIMS IN NIGERIA: A CALL FOR INTERVENTION

We are an internet-based discussion group of Nigerian Muslims living in different parts of the globe but conscious of our responsibilities and obligations towards our fatherland, Nigeria.

We wish to seize this opportunity to formally congratulate you on taking the mantle of leadership of our potentially great country, Nigeria. We also wish to commend your Government's effort towards ensuring fairness, justice, equity, accountability and a better Nigeria.

However, we wish to draw your attention to the urgent need for your Government to put in place one of the most fundamental ingredients for the greatness of any country - the peaceful and harmonious co-existence of its citizens through the respect of their basic rights both as citizens and as human beings, as provided by the Nigerian Constitution as well as the United Nations Charter.

As Muslims, we have noted how in spite of numerous representations, previous administrations in this country have remained insensitive, nay privy, to matters that undermine the practice of the religion of Islam by its believers. Indeed, evidence also abounds where if Muslims are allowed to practice

their religion at all, then they are victimised in various ways. As a result, peace and harmony have continued to elude our country with such devastating consequence on our collective quest for development and progress.

But as your administration comes with a promise to be responsive in delivering governance through equity and transparency, we wish to take you on your words by bringing to your attention areas that need to be addressed not only in order for us to feel the impact of your promises, but also for the hope of harmony and everlasting peace to be restored among Nigerians.

Your Excellency, some of these issues include:

1. Violation of freedom of worship

There seems to be a perennial official misconception in Government circles in this country about what Islam is and what it is not. Such official misconception, unfortunately, is gradually diffused to Government institutions and parastatals.

For the avoidance of doubt and the need to educate people, we wish to make it clear that Islam is a complete way of life for the whole of humanity. It enjoins on us, as believers, our obligations to our Creator, to our families, to our leaders, to our neighbours, to people of other religions and to society as a whole.

In Islam, it is inimical to the teachings of the religion for one to believe in some injunctions and not others. Islam teaches its believers what is allowed and what is not allowed, what is proper and what is improper, and the difference between right and wrong.

It is in this light that the definition of decency in Islam touches on behaviour as well as dress code among believers, among others.

Working on a wrong conception of Islam, previous administrations in Nigeria have imposed or encouraged the imposition of un-Islamic values on Muslims, knowingly or unknowingly, in gross violation of their fundamental right to freedom of worship. Evidence of such gross violation could be seen in the blatant disregard for Muslim women to dress according to Islamic teachings by the Nigerian Law School, some Corporate Organisations especially the Banking Sector, and Institutions like Polytechnics and Colleges of Education. Indeed, parastatals such as the Law School and the NYSC take additional steps to punish Muslim women who insist on adhering to the injunctions of Islam on dressing and physical contact with male counterparts in such programmes as parade and physical exercises. Such women are either refused a call to the Bar or their service year is often extended.

As citizenship is about rights, we view the denial of Muslim women's right by the Nigerian Government through its institutions as not only injurious and provocative, but also as an infringement on the fundamental rights of Nigerian Muslims

generally.

The increasing trend of forcing Muslim women to conform to un-Islamic code of dressing and practices as a necessary, even if un-written, precondition for employment is a very serious discrimination that needs to be arrested. It is also undemocratic.

The attitude of previous administrations seems to, unfortunately, be predicated on the wrong notion that Islam is a religion of unqualified obedience. Yet, nothing can be further from the truth. Islam enjoins its followers to obey leaders, elders and parents. But Islam is also unequivocal in calling on its followers to refuse to obey even parents, whose actions and deeds make or force people to deviate from the ways directed by the Almighty.

2. Degeneration in Moral Standards

Nigerians have for long been complaining about a massive deterioration in moral values that has ushered in a regime of decadence as manifested in phenomenal upsurge in vices such as robbery, drug addiction, corruption and prostitution. It is no coincidence also that this is happening at a time when Government is encouraging the proliferation of some of the leading workshops and institutions where these vices are manufactured and reproduced, through the indiscriminate issuance of licenses for running night clubs and brothels. Sir, this action makes your Government a direct accomplice in societal moral decadence even as it is supposed to be the custodian of morality. The result of this neglect of duty is the growing insecurity that undermines the fundamental rights of some Nigerians to live and work according to their chosen way of life without intimidation or harassment.

3. Growing tension and violence among communities

There is a new trend of recurring feud and violence among and between different communities in different parts of the country. The search for peaceful co-existence among communities in Nigeria will remain wishful as long as people are allowed to take the laws into their hands and, by so doing, destroy property, maim or kill innocent citizens under whatever guise. To arrest some of these, government should engage in a mass mobilisation campaign to remind Nigerians that every citizen has the right to live freely in any part of the country of his/her choice, and also to educate the populace on some of the sacred customs, values and rituals that must be respected.

4. Destruction of places of worship

Places of worship like Churches and Mosques have of recent become targets for destruction and vandalism by hoodlums in times of crises. We are convinced that such places of worship have become easy targets simply because of their locations. There is clearly the need for caution to ensure that Mosques or Churches are not

located in areas largely dominated by followers of the other religion. For activities of worship by followers of each religion will easily be misunderstood as nuisance and provocative by members of the community that do not belong to the religion. Whilst Muslims are committed to tolerance towards people of other faiths, we believe that for the sake of peaceful co-existence it is necessary to avoid situations where places of worship are built with a hidden aim of causing provocation to the predominant religious community. On the other hand, a mechanism should be put in place, where it does not already exist, or re-activated, where it already exists, to prevent the random and deliberate erection of places of worship with a view to causing offence, overtly or covertly, to the host community. We, therefore, seriously view the claim by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) that some state governments have ordered the unlawful demolition of places of worship. We urge the Federal Government to investigate such complaints in all states and reprimand as well as provide urgent redress where necessary.

5. The millennium celebration

We view the proposed plan by your Government to celebrate the new Gregorian millennium as not only insensitive to Muslims, but also as an avenue for rent-seeking and directly unproductive activity. Only 20 years ago Muslims all over the world marked the beginning of the 15th century of Islam. Because of its religious and historical implications, this event was observed in Nigeria by Muslim groups and organisations only, without direct or indirect Federal Government involvement. In view of this precedence and in line with established practice of ensuring a balance between the numbers of Islamic and Christian holidays, it is only reasonable that the Government should abolish any plans for the celebration of the millennium. We believe that the business of organising and funding the millennium celebration should be left to interested private sector outfits and non-governmental organisations.

6. The issue of Sharia

In order to lay a credible foundation for the peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christians in a truly democratic Nigeria, a conducive environment must be created for both religions to be practised fully, freely and in accordance to their prescribed principles. Your Excellency Sir, as you are aware, one of the fundamental tenets of Islam is the Sharia. Unfortunately, the issue of Sharia has been wilfully ignored by past successive governments to the detriment of the Muslims.

In 1979 you endorsed and handed over to a democratic civilian regime a constitution which recognises the Sharia as a legal system with a judicial backing. Since then, the implementation of the Sharia provisions has been persistently and consistently hampered by well-known, specific interest groups in the country. Now that you are back in power, through a democratic process, we see this as an act of providence, and it is therefore our desire and hope that you will use your good offices to remove these obstacles which have continued to hinder Muslims from implementing

the Sharia provisions. We believe that tackling the issue of Sharia once and for all would go a long way in facilitating genuine co-existence between the various religious groups in Nigeria.

7. Some Proposals

Your Excellency Sir, we strongly believe that your Government needs to intervene urgently in addressing the various issues raised in this memorandum. A cogent summary of the key areas that require your immediate intervention is as follows:

- (a) Formulation of statutory directive to all governmental and non-governmental institutions, agencies and organisations in the country to respect the rights and freedoms of Muslims to worship (in all its ramifications) without fear of intimidation.
- (b) Re-assessment and re-evaluation of all existing licenses and regulations on nightclubs, hotels, and similar outfits with a view to curbing the incessant criminal and immoral decadence in the country.
- (c) Establishment of a permanent and effective machinery for creating community awareness about religious beliefs, sacred customs, practices and values with a view to promoting mutual respect of religious values and avoiding unnecessary friction between and within communities.
- (d) An urgent review of existing town/country planning laws and the establishment of Building Enforcement Units to ensure strict compliance with the planning laws at all the levels of government in Nigeria. Such planning laws should incorporate measures to deal with environmental pollution (noise, nuisance and public order disturbance) and problems arising from the use of residential houses for fellowship activities.
- (e) No return of Schools to Missionaries: Muslims across the country have consistently opposed the persistent effort of some religious groups to secure the return of schools to missionaries. We fully support this opposition for the obvious reason that schools have in the past been used to, overtly or covertly, convert many children from the religion of their parents. We urge your Government not to return State Schools to religious groups, as such schools have been and will remain to be maintained with the tax payers' money.
- (f) Revisiting the issue of Sharia with the view to finding a satisfactory solution that guarantees a peaceful co-existence of all and sundry.
- (g) Educating the populace on the right of every citizen to live in any part of the country of his/her choice without fear of intimidation.
- (h) Taking tough measures to discourage rituals and practices that justify the killing of innocent Nigerians.

(i) Encouraging tolerance and dialogue amongst followers of various religions with the hope of fostering greater understanding, unity and quest for a better and prosperous Nigeria.