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Fueled by Controversy Over Sharia Law, Sectarian Violence Spreads in Nigeria

Photo caption: Two men pass by a burned out vehicle amid the rubble of a burned-out downtown residential area in Kaduna, Nigeria, site of clashes between Christian and Muslim Nigerians. Photo/Brennan Linsley

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A new wave of violence swept across northern Nigeria on March 7, after new calls for the introduction of Islamic sharia law in the state of Sokoto – and only days after President Olusegun Obasanjo declared that the governors of the northern states had agreed to suspend sharia legislation. Reports say the spark for this week's unrest were pro-sharia student demonstrations at Usman Dan Fodio University in Sokoto. Widespread ethnic and religious violence across Nigeria over the past two weeks has left at least 1000 people dead, and prompted the State Department to warn Americans against traveling to parts of the West African country.

Violence over sharia first broke out in the northern city of Kaduna in late February, spread to Ada, Onitsha, Port Harcourt, and the southern city of Ife. The religious conflict quickly took on an ethnic dimension, as it built on old tensions between the Islamic Hausa and Fulani in the north, long seen as dominating political and military power, and the mostly Christian Yoruba and Ibo groups in the south, often resented for their dominance of the economy and the nation's national resources. These conflicts make for a fault-line that runs across the middle of Nigeria, with Muslims clustered in the north, and Christians in the south. As the substantial Christian Ibo population in Kaduna was targeted and began fleeing the north, youths in the southeastern city of Aba retaliated against Hausas. Reports say the riots were started by Christian anti-sharia protestors who stormed the governors' office in Kaduna, crying "Jesus is Lord" and "Sharia is Not Y2K Compliant."

After two weeks of violence on March 2 President Obasanjo appealed on national television for calm and national reconciliation. "I did not order the troops in right from the start," the president said, responding to critics, "because in the normal procedure, in such matters, the governor of the state concerned must first indicate that the police strength at its disposal is unable to contain the disturbances, and then specifically request for military assistance.... Once that request came from the deputy governors I immediately ordered the troops to move in to support the police."

President Obasanjo also convened a meeting of the National Council of States, where he and the governors of Nigeria's 36 states discussed the crisis. The meeting reportedly resulted in a "consensus" by the northern governors to suspend the full introduction of Islamic sharia law until Parliament debates and decides if sharia is commensurate with the Nigerian constitution. "It was agreed that as far as sharia is concerned, we will now revert to the status quo ante," said Vice President Atiku Abubakar.

While Christians in the North and South welcomed the President's "consensus," prominent northern Islamic leaders almost immediately expressed their reservations about the suspension. Talking to the BBC Hausa Service, the northerner and former military ruler Muhamadu Buhari said the "consensus" to suspend sharia legislation had been forced on northern governors. "It is not true that the council had agreed that the sharia be suspended.... Alhaji Atiku Abubakar met with the 19 northern governors where a pledge was extracted from them."

The explosive nature of the sharia issue is evident in the fact that mere *calls* for sharia have caused riots in this ethnically volatile country. Thus far the only state to have implemented sharia as part of its judicial system is the impoverished northern state of Zamfara, where Governor Ahmed Sani introduced Islamic law on January 27. Sani contends that he is simply following the will of the vast majority of Muslims in Zamfara, who are disillusioned with the rampant corruption of the era of military rule (Nigeria returned to civilian rule in May 1999) and frightened by rising crime rates. "There'll be no stealing or corruption, and people's mental and spiritual well-being is going to be encouraged," said the Governor, who promised that the rights of Christian minorities will be protected and non-Muslims will not be subjected to Islamic law.

But Christian fears continue in the wake of high-profile sharia sentences rendered by Zamfara's Islamic courts: an 18-year old accused of having pre-marital sex received a public flogging (100 lashes) while his partner watched, and another man accused of drinking alcohol received 80 lashes. Zamfara's authorities also provoked shock (and some amusement) by banning women's soccer, arguing that playing football is "unIslamic," and that "the sport is against the teaching of Islam." (The Nigerian women's soccer team, the Falcons, are current African champions, and reached the quarter-finals of last year's Women's World Cup held in the United States.) Nigeria's Human Rights Law Service has started court proceedings to try to have sharia declared unconstitutional in Zamfara.

While Zamfara State made the transition to sharia peacefully, in Kaduna, which has a sizable Christian minority, the proposal of legislation to introduce sharia triggered devastating unrest. Currently sharia implementation is on hold there, and government officials recently announced the establishment of a five-member committee to bring to justice the perpetrators of the violence.

In his March 2 broadcast, however, Governor Sani of Zamfara made no

reference to the suspension of sharia, and his state attorney general in fact highlighted Zamfara's commitment to introducing sharia. "There is no going back," he said. "The process has been laid. The process is not the personal opinion of the governor or myself. It is a resolve of the people." In Sokoto, where violence most recently broke out, former civilian president Shehu Shagari sided with the governors. "In the democratic system in which we now operate, the federal government has no right to direct the state governments to suspend or rescind any laws, in which they have enacted the normal democratic processes," he said. "The only way it can do so, in my opinion, is by taking the matter to court which is the one body competent to interpret the constitution." According to the newspaper, *The Punch*, the governors of Sokoto, Kano, and Kebbi have all agreed to continue with their implementation of sharia law.

Nigeria's influential Islamic leader, Sheikh Ibrahim el ZakZaky, has openly denounced the way sharia is being exploited by power-hungry politicians – mostly in northern states, where it is a powerful political tool to whip up Islamic nationalism, draw voter support, and portray opponents as anti-Islamic. Critics have also charged that the "sharia card" is a way for (northern) regional governors to increase their autonomy vis-à-vis Obasanjo's central government. Critics point to the state of Sokoto's announcement that it would start implementing sharia on May 29th, the one year anniversary of Obasanjo's coming to power.

The sharia controversy has sparked debates about Nigeria's constitution, the merits of federalism, effective governance, and whether a democratic political system can hold together a nation as diverse as Nigeria. An article in *The Economist* ominously titled "Nigeria Falls Apart Again?" posits that "this time the centre has to assert itself before riots turn to war...the rioting that flared up in the northern city of Kaduna raised the most awful of spectres.... Such slaughters were exactly what preceded the civil war of 1967-70, when the east of the country, Biafra, tried to secede and about 1 million people died."

Stereotypes and clichés are all too readily evoked by ordinary Nigerians to explain the current conflict. Ambimbola Omoniyi, a Yoruba pharmacologist, minces no words: "Hausa people are generally uneducated. They run the country by brute force. And there are historical reasons for this. While Ibos and Yorubas were going to school and getting educated, Hausas were on farms or in military school. Then their cousins put them in power." According to a southern Nigerian doctor working at a Brooklyn hospital, "The sharia affair is simply insecure Northerners trying to get their share of patronage. Before Obasanjo, the Hausa were embezzling money, now they're not able to do so – so they're trying to get rid of him. Nigerian politics is about networks. If your boy is in, you get contracts. It's about money. No scruples."

But many northerners counter that, given southern dominance of the economy, industry, and media, Muslim views and opinions on the conflict are rarely represented. Mashood Baderin, a Nigerian lawyer trained in English Law and sharia, expresses the northern view in a widely-circulated essay, "The Shariah Altercation: The Moral and Legal Questions." Baderin decries the way commentators "misrepresented the Shariah in this debate as an evil and oppressive system," with gratuitous references to "amputation, flogging, stoning, and beheading." Explaining the importance of sharia to Nigeria's Muslims, Baderin notes that historically sharia existed in areas that constitute modern Nigeria since the 11th century, and that sharia courts were "first established in the Borno Caliphate and later in the Hausa states such as Kano and Katsina." Responding to claims that sharia was "never applied beyond the northern part of Nigeria," he reminds us that

sharia courts have existed since 1913 in the Yoruba town of Ede, in today's Oshu state. It was only after British colonization that English law was introduced, and sharia restricted to family and personal law. Indeed, speaking to *The News*, Vice-president Atitu Abubakar, confirmed this point saying that, since the 1999 Amendment of the 1979 Constitution, sharia has been applied to "civil and personal matters in the penal code," and the current debate is about whether to extend sharia to criminal law – a proposition that many Muslims oppose.

Baderin also addresses non-Muslim Nigerians' fears of sharia, saying that "while the source of Shariah is believed by Muslims to be divine, its application is absolutely human." Baderin goes on to argue that "[a]lthough the dynamism in the method of shariah was stagnated...the method of shariah is meant to be dynamic and sensitive to circumstances of time and place...its application is not arbitrary or haphazard."

The conflict over sharia, between secularists and Islamists, reformists and conservatives, is taking place in other parts of Africa as well. Algerian has been in the grips of a bloody civil war for almost a decade since the military stepped in to annul elections won by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), whose central objective was the implementation of sharia. In Egypt, as recently as January, 22 people were killed in clashes between Muslims and Christians. Much of the sectarian violence that has claimed hundreds of lives in Egypt is the result of a conflict between an entrenched military regime and an Islamist opposition intent on establishing a sharia-based Islamic state that would relegate Coptic Christians to secondary status.

In Nigeria, the sharia conflict is more intractable and explosive given the country's unique scenario: myriad ethnic rivalries, a weak central state, demands for autonomy, and a seemingly impassable Muslim-Christian divide, where Muslims' political and military might is checked by Christians economic power.

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