

Appendix 20:

Issues of Majority and Census

Jan H. Boer

The census issue has been a very sensitive one in religious relationships. Often leaders will claim their religion has a majority in a certain state or even in the entire country and *therefore* demand certain rights or even advantages over others. Demands for sharia are often based on alleged majorities. If Muslims consider themselves to constitute a majority either in the entire country or in a region or state, they will expect this to be reflected in government appointments.¹ Same for Christians. Both think of themselves as the majority in the country—and both accuse each other of false claims. Just before the elections in April, 2007, Saad Khan, stated: “Although the country has decidedly a Muslim majority, but how to convince Christians. The vested interests in statistics remaining vague are so strong that many governments have failed to conduct a reliable census.”² Kabiru Muhammad simply assumes an 80% Muslim majority for the country.³

Ado-Kurawa wrote, “The minds of Christians have been conditioned into believing the false information that Christians are more in number than Muslims in Nigeria.” Turning to Obasanjo, “One of his early mistakes” was “his lopsided appointments in favour of Christians, especially his appointment of Christians from clearly Muslim majority states.” “Muslims are certainly more in number than Christians in Kaduna, Kogi and Nasarawa States, but the Ministers from these states are all Christians.” He accused Christians of highly inflating the figures in their favour. Referring to claims made by Bishop Achigili, chairman of Kaduna State CAN, Ado-Kurawa commented that such “patently false assertions do not require any reply. What is unfortunate is that such lies are coming from those who claim to be men of God.”⁴

Taofiq Abiola chided, “You can cry and shout all you like, but the fact remains that Nigeria remains a majority Muslim country. You can beat your chest and say the

¹See, for example, the arguments about an alleged Muslim majority in Kaduna State as collected by S. Bala, 2000, p. 20.

²S. Khan, Apr/2007.

³K. Muhammad, 17 Nov/99.

⁴I. Ado-Kurawa, 2003, *Sharia and the Press...*,” pp. 418-420. For additional census arguments check “Census” in the indices of earlier volumes.

Christians outnumber them (which is not true), but it is not the numbers that count but the effectiveness of those numbers.” For example, in Malaysia a Muslim minority of 40% “do a good job of running that country.”⁵

The Joint Youth Islamic Organizations (JYIO) of Zamfara State published a Gamji article that started as follows:

The war of numbers has been going on for a long time in Nigeria with Christian leaders employing every possible weapon to prove to the world that there are more Christians in Nigeria than Muslims and that at most, Muslims in Nigeria constitute about only 40% of the population. Books have been written and seminars organized. Theories have been propounded and newspaper articles have been calumnies all in this attempt. Census results have been rejected and falsified, because they prove that Muslims are more numerous in Nigeria than Christians.

The Federal Govt. of Nigeria under Olusegun Obasanjo has now come up with a new plot to under-populate Muslims in Nigeria and project them at 40%. This is by way of carrying out an illegal census through what is called National ID card, which it intends to merge with voters’ registration exercise for the 2003 elections.

I cannot go into the details of the alleged plan, except for its goals:

The advantages for the conspirators are that victory for the present President, a non-Muslim, will be ensured with a voter’s register that shows majority Christians. Subsequently, no Muslim will ever again be President in Nigeria since it can be shown by National ID card that Muslims are in the minority. This is the method employed to keep Muslims politically impotent in countries like Cameroon, Benin republic and Togo. Economically, the Muslim States in Nigeria will continue to be under – remunerated based on false figures and fake census. Any protest from Muslims will be squarely faced with brutal military force.

JYIO then called on Muslims to boycott the exercise: “We are therefore calling on all Muslim leaders, politicians, executives, legislators, traditional rulers, Muslim people – businessmen, academicians, students, trade unions, religious organizations, media men and ordinary citizens

⁵Quoted in Y. Yariyok, Feb/2003.

alike--, to come out and reject this ethnic cleansing being waged on our people.” It stated some conditions for getting Muslims back aboard.⁶

Various Muslim organizations insisted on the inclusion of religion. The Conference of Muslim Organisations “vowed to mobilise Muslims to boycott the exercise should religion be excluded.” It “decried the insensitivity of the FG to the objection of Muslims on the decision to exclude religion in the census” and drew attention to the fact that the Muslim stand is similar to that of CAN.⁷

Indeed, so it was. Samuel Salifu, CAN General Secretary, stated, “We want to know how many Christians are in this country as well as other religious bodies and we want to know how many tribes we have.”⁸ Below is a fuller version of his demand from the Lightbearer:

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has reiterated its decision to boycott the forthcoming head count if religion and ethnicity are not included in the questionnaire.

Dr. Samuel Salifu, general-secretary of CAN, emphasised the position in Abuja recently. He said that the decision to boycott the census was taken by the executive of CAN on April 20 after due consideration of the importance of those factors.

“There are very vital reasons why we insist that we should not participate,” he said, adding that “there is no place in the world today where census is conducted without including these two facts.”

He said that census figures were reference points for both government and other groups in any society for planning and development.

“Government is not the only group that plans in the society; the religious leaders also want to use the figures to plan,” he said. “We want to know how many we are, how we are growing and how to plan our development,” he added.

Salifu said that accurate religious figures would disabuse the false claims some religious groups make about what percentage population they constituted in the society.

“In the first instance where did they get those figures they claim? Would it not be better clarified from the census?” Salifu asked.

The general-secretary also observed that if ethnicity were not included in the census data, people who flocked into the country from neighbouring countries would be counted as Nigerians. “This can only be checked if people will indicate their ethnicity to identify where they come from,” he said.

According to him, the omission of the factors in the previous census figure was one of the mistakes that rendered it unreliable and should therefore be corrected this time around. “Census is for development,” he said. “How can that be achieved without factual figures?”

“We are always chanting that we are a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Why then are we shying away from getting the figures that can support the claim?”

⁶JYIO, 2003.

⁷S. Bakoji, 22 Aug/2005.

⁸

NN, 4 Feb/2005. TD, 9 June/2005.

“Why were these factors, which will make the figures more credible and accepted, expunged from the census questionnaire? What is the hidden agenda behind it?”

“In view of all these things we are calling on all Christians in the country not to participate in the census unless the ethnic and religious factors are included,” he said.⁹

The call by CAN was supported by The Northern States Christian Elders Forum.

An example of the sensitive nature of the issue is the leadership President Obasanjo appointed to the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC). While the President, according to Mohammed Haruna, acknowledged Nigerians to be split evenly along religious lines—50% each—“virtually the entire leadership of the NPRC” is Christian. Those who objected were pronounced “unreasonable” and “irresponsible.” But Haruna and others considered it a “blatant act of injustice.” They were accused of mixing religion and politics,¹⁰ a “no-no.” Ignoring census issues leads to charges of oppression, discrimination and injustice.

It was so sensitive an issue, in fact, that the National Population Commission (NPC) decided it should defer the decision about including the religious question in the 2005 census to the FG. At a workshop for representative stakeholders, the issue “was subject to hot debate, with most participants sharply divided.” Some wanted it deleted to “save the exercise from controversy.” Governor Makarfi of Kaduna questioned “the rationality [of the question], when the country is working hard to discourage any distinction along such lines.” Chuwukar Okonjo, “a population expert, urged Nigerians to stop whipping up sentiments on the matter, adding that information on such topics would facilitate education and lead the country into the information age and the advancement of the society.” But even the workshop could not reach a consensus. It advised the NPC to “make submissions on the merits and demerits of the inclusion of religion to the FG and allow it to decide.”¹¹ A yam too hot to handle! By end August, 2005, the decision had been made: It would be excluded. The chairman of the National Population Commission, Samu’ila Danko Makama, “stated that there was no going back on the decision to expunge religion and tribe from the census.”¹²

⁹LB, “CAN Reiterates Position on Census,” Sep/2005, p. 9.

¹⁰M. Haruna, “Muslims and National Conference,” 2005.

¹¹TD, “Census 2005...,” 4 Oct/2004.

¹²S. Bakoji, 22 Aug/2005. O. Ezigbo, 21 May/2005.

The issue was so hot that it led to a postponement of the event till 2007. Sola Odunfa filed the following report in 2006 about the upcoming census:

A new census was to have been held between November and December last year. Preparations for it by the National Population Commission (NPC) started in 2003. But last July, President Obasanjo delayed the exercise until this coming March.

The official reason given for the postponement was that vital material would not arrive from abroad in time for the headcount to be held as scheduled.

What was not openly acknowledged was the gathering political storm over the type of data to be collected.

The controversy relates to ethnicity and religion.

How many Nigerians are Muslims and how many are Christians?¹³

Though the issue was controversial, it was not the first census without a question on religious adherence. According to Yusufu Yariyok, who participated in the 1973 and 1991 censuses, the 1991 census also excluded the question. According to him, it was not an issue then and did not lead to strong objections from either religion. As to why Muslim in the past have wanted to exclude the question, Yariyok explained, “Muslims are aware that there are more Christians in Nigeria, but in order to keep getting funding from the Muslim world they need to maintain the old myth. They have always influenced the exclusion of religion from the data.”¹⁴ That, of course, does not explain why they insisted on inclusion this time around. It seems they were anxious for confirmation of their majority status and to be assured of the actual lay of the land.

Yes, both sides argued they had the majority in the nation and probably expected the census to prove it. Both were prepared to cede certain states to the other, but there the argument was often still about the size of the minority. Remember, for example, the discussions about the number of

¹³NN, 4 Feb/2005. TD, 9 June/2005.

¹⁴Y. Yariyok, Feb/2003; letter of 21 Nov/2007.

indigenous Northern Christians.¹⁵ It was not only an issue of representation, appointments and economics, but also of sharia. If Muslims are in the majority in the country, then they have the right to sharia. The same for individual states. Haliru Binji, a one-time Grand Kahdi of Sokoto State, insisted that sharia is “the law governing a majority of the population of this country” and as such it “has great social relevance.”¹⁶ Even the moderate Lateef Adegbite insisted that the minority should respect the wishes of the majority. In an interview with him, Mikai Mumuni of *TELL* asked him how sharia can be applied in a multi-religious situation. Adegbite emphasised that law represents “the wishes of the majority. You must respect them. Therefore, I will expect non-Muslims to respect that law. I believe non-Muslims will respect the wishes of the majority, because, as the adage goes, when you are in Rome, you must do like the Romans.”¹⁷

Back in 1986, Mahdi Adamu of the University of Sokoto already predicted that eventually the Muslim majority would have its sharia:

*Since Muslims in Nigeria now constitute the largest religious group in the country, and since it is a democratic system of government, one should expect that one day Nigerians will use the constitutional provisions and amend the constitution and entrench the sharia in the society. When this is done, the un-Islamic--or are they anti-Islamic?--acts of such common law agencies as the Nigerian Law Reform Commission will be swept away. It is the duty of the teachers of Islamic law to work out ways and means through which the total revolution of Muslims in the real position of the sharia could be achieved so that the non-violent legal revolution could one day take place in Nigeria.*¹⁸

When sharia was declared, things did not quite go that way. Instead, the world’s democratic forces all ganged up against Zamfara and fellow sharia states. Abdul-Razaq Ibrahim Fagge was totally confused by this turn of events. He wrote,

Taking democracy as rule by the majority in the interest of the majority, in a Muslim majority country like Nigeria [Muslims 50%; Christians 40%; Traditionalists 10%], one may expect the Islamic legal system to prevail. But, when the Muslims started agitating for the sharia in Nigeria, the issue of protecting the interest of the minorities arose....

¹⁵J. Boer, vol. 7, ch. 4, p. 175.

¹⁶H. Binji, 1986, p. 216.

¹⁷M. Mumuni, 15 Nov/99, p. 17.

¹⁸M. Adamu, 1986, p. 220.

The question here is: Are we subjugating the interest of the majority in order to safeguard that of the minorities? Is that what they called democracy?¹⁹

One of the few to be less dogmatic about the majority is Yusuf Hadeijia of the Jigawa State Polytechnic. He wrote, “We all recognise the fact that Muslims are not in a position to impose the sharia in a land where they are in extreme majority. But at the same time, the secularist cannot deny Muslims the right to establish the sharia in a land where the secularists are in a minority.” If this is not dogmatic, it is not too clear either. The sentiment did not prevent Hadeijia from insisting on the right of Zamfara and other states to extend sharia when the dominance of Islam is not in doubt. “There is nothing wrong when a predominantly Muslim community like Zamfara takes into effect the practice of sharia.”²⁰

W. A. Badejo warned about depending too much on majority issues. He wondered on what basis Muslims claim a majority, for “we do not have accurate figures.” Hence, it is advisable not to talk of majority and minority. Even if Muslims were in the majority, would that “warrant the introduction of measures that would not augur well for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria?” Would the insistence of a majority group on its way “ensure peace in the country?” He warned that all Nigerians should remember the fate of Ireland.²¹

After all this suspicion about majority and being excluded from the presidency, on the 28th of May, 2007, a Muslim President was installed, handpicked by the very President who was accused of trying to prevent just such a development. President Obasanjo handed over the presidential gavel to the outgoing Governor of Katsina State, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar’Adua. Congratulations to Your Excellency. May the fear some Christians entertain on basis of your Christian relations record as governor not be realized during your days on the throne.²² I pray that you will ignore the census issue and simply reign within the parameters of equal human, including religious, rights for all, regardless of majority status.

¹⁹A. Fagge, 15 Sep/2005.

²⁰Y. Hadeijia, 8 Dec/99.

²¹W. A. Badejo, 21 June/2000, p. 15.

²²For another 25+ articles on the census, go to *Companion CD* <Misc Arts/Census/ >.