

Abstract:

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Many observers believe that Religion poses one of the most divisive challenges in Nigeria. Over the years, its role, place and scope have remained rather contentious in national life. My intervention will focus on the contentious debate around the status of Islamic Law and Nigeria's pursuit of the goals of a secular state.

Right from colonial times, this issue has been at the front burner of debate about the role and place of Religion in the State. The debate became even more intense as Nigeria prepared for her independence in 1960. With the deliberate policy of the British government to transfer power to the Muslim population, the issue of the status of Islamic law, Sharia, gradually gained ascendancy. After nearly 30 years of military rule (a period dominated by Northern, Muslim officers being at the helm of affairs), Muslims in Nigeria worried that very little effort had been made to expand the frontiers of Sharia Law within the Constitution.

My intervention will review the various initiatives and struggles for and against the expansion of the scope of Sharia Law in the Northern States in particular and Nigeria in general. It will focus on the adoption of Sharia Law by some States in the North after the country returned to civilian rule in 1999. I will use the case of Kaduna State to explore how this challenge was handled by the State government.

In conclusion, I will like to argue that the nation's return to democratic rule offers us the best opportunity to advance the cause of a secular state in Nigeria. In my view, only a secular state can ensure a neutral role for Religion, thus, allowing it to serve as a moral compass, guiding a nation that has become so superfluously religious. Thus, contrary to the view canvassed by many that a secular state is one way of sniffing religion out of the lives of citizens, I would rather argue that we need this space to be able to grow as individuals and as a nation.