Government Response in Assuring Equal Religious Rights for All Citizens: An Empirical Examination of Religious Discrimination and Marginalization against the Church in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper assesses government response in guaranteeing equal religious rights for all citizens, with particular focus on the discrimination and marginalization of the church in northern Nigeria. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of religion, equality, and protection of fundamental human rights, persistent allegations and reports of discrimination, exclusion, insecurity, and unequal treatment against Christian communities in villages and urban communities continue to generate scholarly and public concern within the region. The study considers the extent to which governmental institutions have upheld religious neutrality and protected the constitutional rights of Christians in Northern Nigeria between the periods under review. The study adopts an empirical approach applying both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Keywords: Government Response, Religious Rights (Freedom), Discrimination, Marginalization, Church in Northern Nigeria, Human Rights, Religious Conflict

Introduction

The protection of religious rights or freedom constitutes one of the fundamental obligations of democratic administration and international human rights law. In pluralistic societies such as Nigeria, where various religious traditions coexist, the state's responsibility goes beyond merely recognizing religious plurality to actively guaranteeing equal religious rights and ensuring that no individual or religious community is subjected to discrimination and marginalization based on faith. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) categorically warrant freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and clearly forbid discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, or origin (Abila, S. https://core.ac.Uk/download/478445408.pdf)

Equally, international human rights instruments to which Nigeria is a signatory enforced legal and moral responsibility upon the government to maintain religious freedom and equal treatment for all citizens. However, the study shows the practical realization of this constitutional and international bond continues to be a notable challenge, particularly in Northern Nigeria, where faith-based identity always intersects with political authority, socio-

cultural interactions, and security concerns. (Jones, D. https://core.ac.uk/dowanload/219381750.pdf)

In his work, *Religious Freedom in the World*, Paul Marshall observes that, "Despite the constitutional devotion to religious equality, the experience of many Christian communities in Northern Nigeria reveals a recurring pattern of discrimination and marginalization that raises major concerns regarding the effectiveness of government intervention at all levels." (Paul 2008:100-103). Such favoritism appears in various evidences, such as unequal representation in governmental bodies, restrictions on land ownership and church construction permits, unfair allocation of developmental resources, marginalization in political and administrative affairs, inadequate protection during instances of religious conflict, and inconsistent application of constitutional protections.

It is within this context that this paper conducts an empirical examination of the government's responsibility to respond adequately to ensure equal religious rights for all citizens, with particular emphasis on religious discrimination and marginalisation against the church in Northern Nigeria. The extent to which governmental policies, judicial procedures, administrative systems, security interventions, and constitutional provisions have protected religious freedom and advanced equal citizenship is comprehensively assessed in this article. Furthermore, the article aims to enhance academic discussion on religious autonomy, governance, human rights, and peacebuilding, while providing a practical governmental approach to support inclusive governance, enhance organisational responsibility, and promote viable religious harmony in Nigeria's different society.

Definition of Operational Terms

Three significant keywords are "Discrimination, "Marginalization" and "Religious Right". In this paper, they are used in the following context:

"**Discrimination**" means "Treatment or consideration based on class or category rather than individual merit; partiality or prejudice" *(Discrimination in the USA).* In other words, it is an act of noting differences and showing bias.

"**Marginalization**" from the word "Marginalize" means to "relegate or confine to a lower or outer limit or edge, as in society" (*The American Heritage College Dictionary* 2004:846)

"**Religious Rights**" Religious Rights, as grounded in both international human rights law and constitutional law states that, "*Religious Rights*, "---are the legally and internationally recognized freedoms that defend individuals and religious communities in their ability to profess, practice, observe, teach and propagate their religion or beliefs, either individually or collectively, in public or private, without fear of discrimination, coercion, or state interference, provided that the exercise of such rights does not violate the rights of others or public order. (John 2012:205)

Secondly, the **United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article states** "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" (United *Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article* 18). With this background, the next section focuses on the nature of marginalization of the church in Northern Nigeria.

The Nature of Discrimination and Marginalization of the Church in Northern Nigeria

Many studies and reports have documented some of the experiences of Christians facing exclusion, violence, and unequal treatment in parts of Northern Nigeria. It is also important to acknowledge that religious conflicts in the region frequently involve intricate political, ethnic, economic and security dimensions. This section identifies a few forms of discrimination and marginalization directed against Christian minorities in the region.

1. Political Marginalization and Underrepresentation in Government

One major form of discrimination experienced by Christians in Northern Nigeria for many years is political exclusion from key government positions. In several northern states, where Islam constitutes the dominant religion, Christians have often complained of limited access to key strategic political offices such as Governor, local Government Chairman, emirate council position and senior civil service appointments. Vaughan cites examples of states such as Kano, Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto and Kebbi, where Muslim elites have historically dominated political leadership. Christian communities have argued that their numerical presence is often not reflected in political representation. (Vaughan 2016:75-76)

The introduction of Sharia Law in twelve northern states between 1999 and 2001 further intensified concerns of Christians regarding their political inclusion and citizenship rights. Scholars argue that many Christians perceived the development as an indication of state preference for one religion over others. Philip asserts, "From 1999-2001, the adoption of Sharia Law in twelve Northern Nigerian states created fears among Christian minorities about political exclusion and unequal citizenship rights". (Ostien 2007:200-205)

2. Educational Discrimination

Investigations, reports and experiences reveal that Christians in some northern communities have reported difficulties relating to: allocation of educational resources, appointment of Christian school administrators, religious instructors in public schools and construction of Christian mission schools in certain areas. Records imply that, Christian students in some northern villages have been forced to take part in Islamic religious practices or have faced hindrances when seeking to study Christian Religious Studies. Fabola observes that educational procedures often reflect the dominant religious culture, which can hinder equal chance for Christian ethnic minority groups. (Muslim-Christian Encounter in Colonial Africa 1998:105-110). He notes further that, "Several Christian organizations have highlighted concerns over inadequate provision of Christian Religious studies teachers in public schools across parts of Northern Nigeria since early 2005". (Muslim-Christian Encounter in Colonial Africa 1998:105)

3. Restrictions on Church Construction and Religious Freedom

This is another form of marginalization that involves restrictions on the construction and expansion of churches. Fabola, in his submission, again observes that, "Christian communities in several Northern states have complained about delays in obtaining building permits, refusal of government approvals for church construction, demolition of Christian worship centers, and unequal treatment compared with mosques". Many other researchers have argued that such restrictions undermine constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. (Muslim-Christian Encounter in Colonial Africa 1998:107)

An example can be seen in the year 1988, when the Kaduna state government demolished a Christian Chapel under construction at Kaduna Polytechnic, resulting in religious tension and protests. Secondly, after the implementation of Sharia Law in 1999, numerous Christian groups experienced difficulties in securing permits for new church buildings in some Northern states.

4. Religious Violence and Targeted Attacks

Toyin affirms that, "Perhaps the most visible form of marginalization has been violent attacks against Christian communities, Churches, Clergy and Christian-owned properties". (Muslim-Christian Encounter in Colonial Africa 1998:108)

History reveals that Northern Nigeria has witnessed repeated episodes of sectarian violence, including the Maitatsine uprising, Kafanchan riots, Kaduna state crises, Chirang in the Bokkos area on Christmas eve, Boko Haram Insurgency, and attacks by armed bandit groups. Others are the Maitatsine Riots (1980-1985) and the Kano riot in 1980. Thousands of Christians were killed, and several churches were destroyed. In the 1982 Maiduguri riots, Christians lost their lives and properties; in the 1984 Yola/Jimeta violence, hundreds of Christians reportedly were killed. Kafanchan crisis in 1987, Religious conflict began at the College of Education, and more than 150 churches were reportedly destroyed across Kaduna and neighboring areas". (Muslim-Christian Encounter in Colonial Africa 1998:110)

From the year 2001 to 2010, Churches, Pastors, and Christian communities became frequent targets of bombings and attacks, where Christian worshippers were attacked during Christmas and Sunday Services, which displaced thousands of Christians from Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states. Again, from the year 2011 to date, the insurgents began to upgrade their status into: bandits, terrorists, kidnappers, Fulani herders, unknown gunmen, etc. They adopted a strategy of bombing places of worship and synchronized attacks during Christian festivities. A few examples are as follows:

25th December 2011, bombing of St. Theresa's Catholic Church, Madalla, Niger state; Church of Christ in the Nation Headquarters, Jos; St. Fimbers Catholic Church, Jos; an ECWA Church in Kajuru Local Government of Kajuru in Kaduna state; Chirang in Bokkos LGC of Plateau State, Kamel in Bokkos LGC, Ancha in Miyango of Bassa LGC, and many other places. Those bombings and attacks have led to the killing of dozens of worshippers, and many worshippers were kidnapped, and many others displaced to refugee camps. Many of those villages in Mangu, Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, Riyom and Bassa Local Government areas in Plateau state are occupied by Fulani and their cows. (Pew Research Center. 4th edition:.65-66)

5. Bias in Economic Chances and Job Routine

Countless inquiries show that Christians in many northern states encountered barriers or huddles in public-sector job openings and promotion. Normally citing areas that contain civil service recruitment, Government Scholarship and governmental purchasing, and high-level administrative positions. Scholars argue that religious association may affect job chances especially in regions where religion considerably from political structures.

Christian advocacy groups like the Pew Research Center, Global Restrictions on Religion and Open Doors World Watch List Reports have repeatedly alleged insufficient representation of Christians in state ministries and local government administrations across some parts of Northern Nigeria. (Open Doors. 3rd edition:120-125)

6. Social Exclusion, Forced Displacement and Identity

The reported cases of discrimination and marginalization show that many Christian communities in Northern Nigeria have experienced social exclusion, resulting from recurring violent attacks and insecurity. Consequences of such violence include internal displacement, segregation of residential communities based on religious affiliation, loss of ancestral lands, destruction of churches and homes, and fear of public evangelism and outreach, which argues that repeated attacks have created an atmosphere of insecurity that limits the full participation of Christians in social and economic life." (John. 205)

In summary, the marginalisation and discrimination against Christians in Northern Nigeria have been clear visible political exclusion, educational injustices, restriction on religious expression, targeted violence, economic adversity, and social displacement. Historical events, including the implementation of Sharia Law in some northern regions, ongoing ethno-religious conflict, and extreme insurgencies, have formed beliefs and expertise of unjust treatment among the Christian minority. To attain lasting peace and national unity, authorities must stress the need for constitutional equality, interfaith dialogue, impartial governance, protecting religious freedom, and effective security procedures for all individuals regards of their religious backgrounds.

The Constitutional Provision Guaranteing Freedom of Religious Equality and Protection of Human Rights in Nigeria

It should be noted that Nigeria, as an independent nation, has a constitutional framework that guarantees freedom of religion, equality before the law, and the protection of fundamental human rights, through several provisions contained in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended). (*Encyclo Reader*, https://encycloreader.org/r/wikipedia/php?q=Apostasy-in-Islam-by-county). These provisions are especially important in a pluralistic society such as Nigeria, where faith-based diversity demands legal safeguards against discrimination, marginalization, and religious persecution. The provisions are outlined as follows.

Firstly, Section 10 is on the Prohibition of State Religion. This study discovered that one of the most important constitutional provisions relating to religious equality is section 10, which states that: "The Government of the Federation of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion". (*Encyclo Reader*, https://encycloreader.org/r/wikipedia/php?q=Apostasy-in-Islam-by-county: 420). This provision establishes Nigeria as a "Secular state". However, scholars often describe Nigeria as a "State of religious neutrality", (Ojo, Vol.13.no.3, 2007:10-12) rather than strict secularism. The essence of section 10 is to "Stop government preference for Christianity, Islam or any other religion; it seeks to guarantee equal treatment of all religious groups and to ensure that public institutions remain impartial in religious matters". (Ojo, Vol.13.no.3, 2007:11)

From an academic standpoint, Bielefeldt explained that Section 10 serves as the "constitutional foundation for religious pluralism andand living togetherIt is intended to prevent the use of state power to advance or suppress any religious belief. It provides a legal basis for challenging policies that appear to favor one religion over another. (Ojo, Vol.13.no.3, 2007:12)

Secondly, Section 38 discusses the Freedom of thought, conscience and Religion. This study notes that this section is the principal constitutional guarantee concerning religious freedom in Nigeria. It provides that every person has the right to: freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; change their religion or belief; manifest and propagate religious beliefs through worship, teaching, practice, and observance; and participate in religious activities either privately or publicly. (A Bibliography of Islamic Criminal Law Vol. 21, No. 4, 2009:90-100)

This provision protects both individual and collective expressions of faith. It also safeguards religious minorities by guaranteeing their right to practice and propagate their beliefs without interference from the state or dominant religious groups. Furthermore, as contained in the constitution, section 38 as amended, protects students from compulsory participation in religious instructions or ceremonies that conflict with their beliefs, and it equally allows religious communities to provide religious instruction within institutions established by those communities". (Federal Republic of Nigeria Sec.38:1).

Thirdly, Section 42 Centers on the Freedom from Discrimination. It prohibits discrimination against any Nigerian citizen on the grounds of: religion; ethnic origin; community affiliation; place of origin; political opinion; and sex (Ojo, 12). This provision is particularly relevant to discussions of religious marginalization in Northern Nigeria. It makes certain that no citizen should suffer disadvantage or be denied opportunities because of religious identity. Ojo explains further that, from a human rights perspective, Section 42 embodies the principle of equality before the Law and seeks to eliminate institutional and structural discrimination. It provides constitutional protection against unequal treatment in employment, education, political participation and access to public service. (Ojo 12)

Fourthly, Chapter 4 discusses the Fundamental Human Rights. This chapter contains a comprehensive Bill of Rights, including: Right to life (Section 33); Right to Human Dignity (Section 34). Right to personal liberty (Section 35); Right to Fair Hearing (section 36); Right to Privacy (section 37); freedom of Religion (section 38); Freedom of Expression (section 39); Freedom of Association (Section 40); Freedom of Movement (Section 41); Freedom from Discrimination (section 42). These chapters, with their collective provisions, established the constitutional architecture for protecting human rights as well as ensuring equal citizenship regardless of religious affiliation.

The above is the discussion of the religious marginalization of Christians and other religious minorities in Northern Nigeria. These constitutional provisions give the legal standard against which governmental actions and social practices may be evaluated. The study observes that, while the constitution pledge religious equality, scholars also debated that execution intervals, political concerns, ethno-religious dispute, and lopsided implementation of constitutional defensed have contributed to constant accusations of religious discrimination and marginalization of Christians and minority communities in Northern Nigeria.

Effects of Religious Discrimination and Marginalization on Christian Mission in Northern Nigeria

The religious discrimination and marginalization being experienced by Christians in Northern Nigeria as a result of uneven enforcement of constitutional safeguards have had negative and profound consequences for the development, effectiveness and durability of Christian mission in Northern Nigeria. Although, as discussed in the constitutional provisions, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended), guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the actual implementation of these constitutional provisions has often been uneven in some parts of Northern Nigeria. Consequently, Christian missions've encountered legal, political, socio-cultural and security-related obstacles that have constrained their evangelistic, educational, medical and socio-economic contributions. Matthew Hassan Kuka, in his work, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, shows that these challenges have had extensive consequences not only for the Christian Community, but also for regional development and national integration. (Kuka 1993:228). The following discussion presents some major effects from the content of our studies.

1. Restriction of Evangelistic Activities and Church Expansion

One of the most visible consequences of religious discrimination is the restriction placed on missionary evangelism and church expansion. E. P. T. Crampton, in his work, Christianity in Northern Nigeria, observes that, "Christian Missionary organizations have frequently experienced administrative delays and institutional barriers in acquiring land for churches, obtaining certificates of occupancy, securing building permits or conducting large-scale evangelistic programmes in some Northern states". (Crampton 2004:210-212). While some of these restrictions are frequently justified as an administrative policy or security grounds, many scholars argue that their selective application reflects structural religious inequalities.

Ajayi, corroborating Crampton's submission, says, "Such limitations have reduced the capacity of Christian mission to establish new congregations, chiefly within predominantly Muslim communities, thereby restricting opportunities for evangelization and discipleship". (Ajayi, 1965:80-82). As a result of such limitations, many mission agencies have consequently redirected their efforts towards regions where faith-based freedom is comparatively better protected, resulting in unseen patterns of missionary expansion across Northern Nigeria.

2. Destruction of Missionary Infrastructure

Religious violence as witnessed in some volatile states in Northern Nigeria has severally affected and destroyed Christian missionary structures such as churches, mission schools, theological institutions, hospitals and administrative facilities. It should be noted that the destruction of these facilities, built over decades of missionary investment in education, healthcare, and community development, has affected the services these facilities provide to humanity in society.

The evil activities of insurgency caused by Boko Haram, which started in 2009, represent one of the most devastating examples. Since that time, numerous churches, educational institutions and mission hospitals in Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Jos, Benue, Kaduna, and some neighboring states were destroyed or abandoned following repeated attacks. Besides the

immediate physical losses, the destruction undermined literacy programmes, theological education, vocational training and healthcare services that benefited both Christians and Muslims. (Paden 2008:200-268)

Many scholars observe that the replacement cost of damaged infrastructure has diverted major financial resources from missionary expansion to reconstruction and humanitarian relief, thereby slowing long-term mission development. Falola said, "The destruction of mission infrastructure has also discouraged donor agencies from investing in long-term development projects in insecure regions". (Falola, 1998:55-57)

3. Forced Displacement of Christian and Mission Workers

The effect of religious persecution and violent attacks on Christians minorities in their ancestral homes has generated widespread internal displacement among the Christian population in various affected states of Northern Nigeria. This persecution is always well-planned, calculated and organized attacks by Bandits, Boko Haram, insurgents and kidnappers on Christian communities. Those who survive, like pastors, missionaries, teachers, security personnel, medical workers, business owners, students and many church members, are compelled or forced to abandon their homes, businesses and places of ministry for their lives". (Falola, 1998:55). These men, women and children were innocently displaced to IDP camps that are not even safe for them.

Affirming the above submission, Rotimi said, "The displacement of mission workers and other professional personnel has weakened pastoral care ministry, interrupted discipleship programmes, and reduced evangelistic outreach, and fragmented established congregations. Numerous mission stations established over several decades have either been permanently abandoned or are operating below capacity because of insecurity" (Babalola, 2015: 40(3), 263-288; Suberu, Vol. 21, No.4, 2009:547-560)

Beyond disrupting missionary activities in some of these regions, there is forced displacement and relocation to neighboring communities, and some to their relatives in the city or to other states, and that has also contributed to poverty, hunger, unemployment, family disintegration, cases of immorality and increased dependence on humanitarian aid or assistance inside affected Christian communities" (Babalola, 2015: 40(3), 263-288; Suberu, Vol. 21, No.4, 2009:548)

4. Deterioration in Educational Input by Mission Schools

Historically, Christian missionaries who selflessly founded Christian mission schools have played a key part in broadening entrance to formal education throughout Northern Nigeria. Barnes validates this when he said, "Mission schools have produced political leaders, professionals, clergies, captains of industries, and civil servants, while promoting literacy, moral formation and national development". (Barnes, 2009: 220-221). However, it is observed that persistent religious discrimination and insecurity have significantly weakened this educational legacy.

Many mission schools have been demolished during violent hostilities, while others have undergone decrease in admission due to parents' concern over the safety of their children.

Another area is administrative bias in school approvals and disproportionate government support, which have additionally restrained the expansion of Christian educational institutions, with cessential observation. Jakada confirmed the effect and said, "The reduction in missionary educational activities has unduly affected rural communities where mission schools often represented the only accessible source of quality education". (Jakada, 2024:145-146)

5. Weakening of Healthcare and Humanitarian Social Services

Christian missions for long have enhanced government endeavor by building mission hospitals, clinics, maternity centers, and medical services, especially in distant rural areas. Still, religious discrimination, religious animosity, and violent conflicts and attacks have significantly weakened these humanitarian ministries and services.

Supporting the above submission, Higazo submits that the destruction or closure of mission hospitals, clinics, and maternity centers has reduced access to quality healthcare for thousands of residents irrespective of religious affiliation; and many medical professionals serving in mission institutions have frequently relocated because of insecurity, thereby creating shortages of proficient healthcare workers in conflict-affected communities. (Higazi, 2011:60-70). Consequently, the effects of discrimination go beyond Christians and adversely affect the wider population that depends upon mission-sponsored social services.

6. Economic consequences for Christian Missions

Religious marginalization has imposed considerable monetary burdens upon Christian missionary organizations, churches and individuals. In other words, resources that could have been invested in evangelism, theological education, church planting, and community social services for development are increasingly diverted toward rebuilding destroyed churches, schools, and healthcare centers, as well as providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons and strengthening security measures. (Higazi, 2011:60-70)

Against this backdrop, some scholars uphold that insecurity has discouraged both local and international donors from investing in long-term missionary projects within the high-risk areas. The resulting financial restrictions have limited institutional expansion and diminished the sustainability of many mission programmes, like mission and evangelism outreach, medical outreach, organizing crusades and mission field visitations.

7. Psychological, Emotional and Spiritual Consequences

Persistent discrimination, marginalization and persecution of Christian Minorities in their remote villages and communities without any response by the government authorities, have generated a serious psychological and emotional consequences among Christian believers who had experiences of violence bereavement, displacement, mass burials, sound of gunshots, the wounded, sleepless nights in the bush, and uncertainty have contributed to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and emotional exhaustion. (Best, 2007:15-20)

Supporting the above assertion, Best agrees that "Missionaries serving in volatile environments often experience burnout resulting from prolonged exposure to insecurity and repeated traumatic events". (Best, 2007:15). Nevertheless, many churches and Christian

religious organizations have responded by strengthening Pastoral Counseling, trauma healing ministries, and spiritual formation programmes, thereby manifesting remarkable institutional resilience.

8. Erosion of National Integration and Social Cohesion

National integration is the deliberate effort by governments and society to promote unity, equality, participation, and reciprocal respect among citizens. It seeks to reduce divisions arising from ethnicity, religion, language, or regional differences, and encourages all citizens to identify with the Nation above sectional interests. Social cohesion is the strength of relationships and the sense of membership shared by members of a society. A connected society promotes inclusion, social justice, equality, trust in institutions, and engaged involvement in community life. (Best, 2007:15)

The erosion of these national integration and social cohesion has resulted in religious discrimination and marginalization, which has undermined trust between religious communities and weakened citizens' confidence in public institutions. Perceived inequality in access to public employment, recruitment processes into security agencies, political representation, land ownership, national character appointments and religious freedom reinforce social exclusion and deepen communal divisions.

Supporting the above submission, Lawal affirms that, "from the perspective of conflict theory, systematic marginalization creates structural inequalities capable of sustaining cycles of violence and mutual suspicion. Consequently, religious discrimination not only affects Christian missions but also constitutes significant challenges toward democratic governance, national integration, sustainable peace and socio-economic development". (Lawal, 2011:75-77)

9. Promotion of Christian Unity & Ecumenical Collaboration

Unexpectedly, persecution, discrimination and marginalization have also inspired larger unity and collaboration among various Christian denominations. Victims of religious violence and persecution who shared their experiences of discrimination have encouraged cooperation in advocacy, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and interdenominational fasting and prayers. Investigation disclose that organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), and other Christian bodies have expand organized reactions to religious persecution, safeguarded constitutional rights, and foster peaceful harmony among different Christian beliefs and practices. "This cooperation has reinforced interdenominational bond that earlier were weakened by denominational diversity." (Book Review: Faith and Politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World. 2010)

The previous discussion stresses that religious discrimination and marginalization have had widespread and harmful consequences on Christian missions in Northern Nigeria. These challenges have restrained evangelistic outreach, weakened educational and healthcare ministries, obstructed community development programmes, inflicted significant economic hardships, and compromised efforts toward national integration. Such results indicate that

discrimination against Christian missions is not enclosed to church-related matters but represents a significant developmental and human rights concern for the wider society.

However, Christian missions have shown significant patience through collective Christian unity, humanitarian programmes, conflict intervention, shock restoration programmes, and firm commitment to all-encompassing mission. Confronting these difficulties demands the firm enforcement of constitutional protections for religious freedom, just public policies, strengthened security strategies, and continuing interfaith discussions to promote equity, peaceful living together, and united national development.

Practical Response by Government to Ensure Equal Religious Rights for all Citizens

To ensure equal religious rights for all citizens and to effectively eliminate religious discrimination and marginalization, particularly against Christian communities and other religious minorities in Northern Nigeria, the government at all levels must embrace a comprehensive principle or strategy that integrates constitutional enforcement of legal reforms, institutional strengthening, strengthening security sector accountability in the region, socio-economic inclusion, educational reforms and interfaith dialogue.

1. Government needs to strengthen the enforcement of constitutional guarantees on Religious Freedom

Okeke observes that Weak enforcement of constitutional guarantees is a challenge in the Nigerian state. "The Federal Government of Nigeria needs to move beyond constitutional declarations by ensuring the effective implementation of the fundamental rights guaranteed under the constitution". *(The Protector of the Fundamental Rights* https://www.mcqubuddy.com/question/12639). Though the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) under section 46: "Enforcement of Fundamental Rights," section 46 empowers individuals whose constitutional rights have been violated to seek redress in the High court. This provision is significant because constitutional rights became meaningful only when effective enforcement mechanisms exist. According to section 46, affected persons of religious discrimination, persecution, and rejection can established legal actions to challenge infringement of their freedom, which promise freedom of opinion, conscience, religion, and freedom from discrimination.

The inquiry disclose that these provisions are always insufficiently implemented. Therefore, the government at the Federal, state, and Local levels should establish a system to track adherence with constitutional provisions and hold individuals or institutions that infringe citizens' religious rights accountable.

Egbunu advised that independent constitutional oversight should regularly investigate complaints of religious discrimination in employment, political appointments, education, access to public services, and allocation of public resources. In his explanation, Egbunu upholds that equal enforcement of constitutional rights would reinforce citizens' confidence in government neutrality and promote national unity. (Fisher. 2020. https://core.ac.uk/download/346417673.pdf)

2. Enacting and Enforcing Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination legislation

A fundamental governmental response should focus on the effective enforcement of constitutional provisions relating to freedom of religion and protection from discrimination. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and freedom from discriminatory treatment. (Bibliography of Islamic Criminal Law https://ebin.pub/a-bibliography-of-islamic-criminal-law-9789004472785-9004472789.html; 430-435)

Agreeing with the above submission, Paden observes that, "empirical evidence indicates that these constitutional safeguards are not consistently implemented across all levels of government. Commenting on the subject matter, Okeke, Umeobika and Ahanwa said,…The effectiveness of constitutional democracy depends not merely upon the existence of legal provisions, but upon the willingness and capacity of the state institutions to enforce them impartially" (Journal of Customary and Religious Law https://journals.unizik.edu.ng/jocarl/index()Okeke; Odinaka, Umeobika and Ahanwa. Vol.2, No.2, 2025:250-258). Therefore, for effective monitoring, federal, state, and local governments at their levels should establish robust institutional mechanisms for monitoring or checking compliance with constitutional provisions, investigating alleged violations of religious rights, and prosecuting individuals or public officials who engage in discriminatory practices.

3. Strengthening Judicial Independence

Adequately checking and enhancing access to constitutional remedies would further reinforce public confidence in the government's commitment to religious neutrality and the rule of law; again, there should be meaningful sanctions against violators. The institutionalization of comprehensive antidiscrimination laws would provide legal certainty, strength, accountability and offer effective remedies for victims while discouraging discriminatory practices within public administration. (Journal of Customary and Religious Law https://journals.unizik.edu.ng/jocarl/index()Okeke; Odinaka, Umeobika and Ahanwa. Vol.2, No.2, 2025:250-258)

4. Promote Inclusive Governance and Equal Representation in Public Institutions

The government should deliberately institutionalize inclusive governance by ensuring that appointments into public offices, recruitment in security agencies, political participation, and access to public services are based on merit, competence, qualification and constitutional principles rather than religious affiliation, ethnicity or politic. In his contribution, Kukah explained that "recognizing or effectual exclusion of particular religious groups from governance often causes hostility, suspicion, and social division. Hence, honest recruitment procedures, unbiased representation in decision-making bodies, and just distribution of developmental projects should become fundamental elements of public policy. (Kuka, 228)

Another area for equal and inclusive governance is that the Government should also establish independent monitoring mechanisms to assess compliance with the Federal Character Principles and other constitutional provisions designed to promote equity and national integration. Such inclusive governance will enhance citizens' confidence in public institutions and foster a stronger sense of belonging among diverse religious communities.

5. Strengthen security, Justice, and Protection for Vulnerable Religious Minority Communities

Constitutionally, the primary responsibility of every government is the protection of lives and property without favour or discrimination. Therefore, security agencies should respond promptly and impartially to incidents of religious violence, attacks on places of worship, and violations of fundamental human rights. Durham, Ferrani, Charuto and Thayer suggest that intelligence gathering, early-warning systems, rapid response mechanisms, and community policing initiatives should be strengthened in areas vulnerable to religious conflict, particularly in Northern Nigeria. (Durham, 2013:420)

Similarly, essential is the swift inquiry and prosecution of culprits of religiously prompted violence to end the widespread tradition of unaccountability. Government should also provide adequate restitution, reintegration, and rebuilding support for affected communities regardless of religious selfhood. Such steps, according to Ladan, will enhance public trust, prevent future acts of religious persecution, and strengthen the constitutional standard that every citizen enjoys uniform protection under the law. (Ladan, 2 (1), 2004:120-125)

6. Promote Interreligious Dialogue, Peace Education, and Civic Enlightenment

lasting religious impartiality cannot be achieved merely through legal modification it also requires intentional efforts to change societal perspectives and strengthen inter religious relationships. Government at all levels should work together with religious leaders, educational organizations, traditional leadership, civil society organizations, and the media to promote interreligious discussion forbearance, and peaceful living. To promote interreligious dialogue, Okeke, Uneobika and Ahanwa assert that "Educational curricula at all levels should incorporate civic education, constitutional values, human rights, and religious tolerance as essential components of National development". (Journal of Customary and Religious Law https://journals.unizik.edu.ng/jocarl/index, Okeke, Odinaka Chukwu, Umeobika and Ahanwa, *Freedom of Thought, Conscience*, and *Religion in Nigeria: Constitutional*... 330-335). To encourage enlightenment, government efforts to embark on public enlightenment campaigns should challenge stereotypes, discourage hate speech, and encourage mutual respect among adherents of different faiths. Moreover, the government should set up lasting interreligious peace councils at federal, state, and local government levels to promote discussions, intervene, evolving disputes, foster cooperative community development. Such measures will assist substantially to national inclusion, social harmony, and the long-term preservation, of operational religious rights for all members of the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the responses above are grounded in constitutional principles and public policy and address both institutional and societal dimensions of religious equality. Collectively, they move beyond theoretical recommendations by proposing actionable reforms in the key areas of legal and constitutional enforcement to uphold religious freedom, inclusive governance to eliminate religious bias in public administration, and impartial security and justice systems to protect all religious communities equally. Unbiased security and justice systems to safeguard all religious communities uniformly, peacebuilding and community-related education to tackle the fundamental social factors of discrimination. Together, all these actions provide a

thorough structure for reinforcing religious freedom, promoting national inclusion, and promoting democratic governance in Nigeria.

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