

The Role of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Unifying Muslims in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges

By

Abdulazeez B. Shittu, PhD*

P. O. Box 940, Gwagwalada, 902101, FCT, Abuja, Nigeria.
abshittu@yahoo.com, c.22b@hotmail.com

Abstract

The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) was purposely created, inter alia, to unite the Nigerian Muslim individuals and organisations, to guide on the correct practice of Islam, to mediate in wrangling among Muslim faithful, which usually lead to intra and inter religious violence and to harmonise the major religious celebrations in the country. Being the highest Islamic organisation in the country, this paper looks at some of the achievements of the Council as well as various challenges facing it, in order for it to strategise and make amendments where necessary. The paper thereby offers some suggestions/recommendations on the way forward for the Council to be better positioned in order to meet the aspirations of the Nigerian Muslims and thus become an organisation they will be proud of.

Keywords: Nigeria, Muslims and Unity

Introduction

The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) was established in 1973, but formally took off in 1974, with the election of the pioneer principal officers at a national conference held in Kaduna.¹ This landmark event ushered in the adoption of a constitution, which stipulates in article 1:

* Dr. Abdulazeez B. Shittu is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy & Religions, University of Abuja, Nigeria.

¹ Amin Igwegbe, the NSCIA Director of Administration, Interview by Author, NSCIA Headquarters, Abuja, 10th – 11th June, 2010.

Muslim Communities, Islamic organisations and individual Muslims are hereby constituted into a central body to be known and called the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs.²

Since then, the Council has gone through various restructuring in order to be better positioned to meet the aspirations of the Nigerian Muslims. According to Ustaz Igwegbe, some practical steps were taken to achieve this laudable objective, which include the expansion of the existing committees and the formation of some new ones to handle specific functions. Among the main objectives of the Council is to unite Nigerian Muslims under one body that will be acceptable “across the borders”. According to Adegbite, when the *Jihad* of Sheikh Uthman dan Fodio (1754-1817) had successfully materialised in the formation of the Sokoto Fulani Caliphate throughout most of the North-West and North-Central parts of Nigeria, counterbalanced by the powerful El-Kanemi Kanuri Empire of the North-East, the diverse Muslim Communities in other parts of the country, especially, in the South-West remained disparate groups under mainly heathen Kings.³ When therefore, political independence came in 1960, and religion was consequently de-emphasised, it was not difficult for the North to re-group religiously under the aegis of the *Jamaa’atu Nasr al-Islam* (JNI) – the Society for the Support of Islam. This feat chided the South-West, though several efforts were made towards uniting the Muslim faithful in that part of Nigeria. Adegbite argues that this challenge from the North occasioned the emergence of the United Muslim Council (UMC). But due to the fact that it was championed by the ruling political party, the UMC was not embraced by all Muslims in the Western Zone. As a result of this political affiliation, the Muslim Progressive Council (MPC) was established to counter the UMC. It was not until the coming together of the Western Joint Muslim Organization (WESJOMO) and the *Najah* (success) Joint Muslim Organisation (NAJOMO), that all Muslim Organisations and communities became united in a single body. On the other hand, Lagos, which was known for operating as a distinct Muslim community, established the Nigerian Muslim Council (NMC), bringing together all Islamic Organisations in the Lagos Island and its environs.⁴ To meet the yearning and aspirations of Muslims in Nigeria to have an overall organisation that will be accepted across the borders, these bodies, the WESJOMO, NAJOMO, NMC and JNI, worked together to create in 1973 the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA).⁵

Aims and Objectives of NSCIA

Being an organisation established to cater for, preserve, protect, promote and advance the interests of Islam and the Muslims throughout the length and breadth of Nigeria, the Council’s objectives include the following:

² See Article 1, page 3 of the NSCIA Constitution.

³ Abdul-Lateef Adegbite, “Unity of the Nigerian Ummah: An Imperative for the 21st Century,” <<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/35399737/Chapter-0-Intro-to-Islamic-Perspectives>> (accessed 23 February, 2011).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

1. to promote Islamic solidarity through fostering brotherhood and observance among Muslims in Nigeria and other parts of the world;
2. to promote the continued application of the *Shari'ah* in Nigeria and the observance of Islamic morality.
3. to ensure that the ideas of Islam, as laid down in the Glorious Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. are adhered to by all Muslims in Nigeria;
4. to serve as a channel of contact with the government authorities on Islamic affairs;
5. to ensure uniform observance of Islamic rites, including festivals throughout the Federation of Nigeria;
6. to co-ordinate the external contacts, interests and activities of Muslims in Nigeria as individuals or groups.
7. to build, manage and support mosques in Nigeria and elsewhere;
8. to cater for the social welfare of Muslims and others;
9. to promote the establishment of Islamic economic system in Nigeria, and encourage all Muslims to engage in legitimate economic activities; and
10. to engage in any lawful activities in fulfilment and furtherance of the foregoing aims and objectives.⁶

Membership and Organs of the NSCIA

Since the Council is declared as the umbrella association of every person who professes the oneness of the Almighty Allah and the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad s.a.w., all Muslim communities, Islamic organisations and individuals in Nigeria are automatically linked with it through their respective state central bodies known as the "State Council for Islamic Affairs", or the "State Councils".⁷ Similarly, any individual or organisation that embraces Islam and accepts the finality of the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. is also assumed as a member of the Council.⁸

For the smooth running of Council's activities, the following organs were put in place to oversee various functions:

1. The General Assembly
2. The National Executive Council
3. The Standing Committees
4. The State Councils
5. The Local Committees
6. Zonal Offices and Zonal Consultative Committees⁹

The General Assembly: The General Assembly is the supreme legislative organ of the Council, and it is empowered to have the final authority in all matters related to Islam and Muslims in Nigeria.¹⁰ This assembly consists of the following members: The President General of the Council, the National Officers of the Council and the State Councils. For the

⁶ For more on the aims and objectives of the Council, see article 3 of the NSCIA Constitution.

⁷ See Article 4 of the NSCIA Constitution.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Article 5 of the NSCIA Constitution.

¹⁰ See Article 6 of the NSCIA Constitution.

purpose of selecting state representatives to the General Assembly, all states in the federation have been grouped by the Council's constitution into categories A, B and C. Category A consists of the states in which Muslims constitute absolute majority, which are represented by 10 members. Category B is made up of the states in which Muslims form a simple majority, and they are given the privilege of 7 representatives, while Category C consists of the states in which Muslims are in the minority, and they are represented by 5 persons.¹¹

The National Executive Council: The National Executive Council is regarded as the Executive arm of the NSCIA. Thereby, all officers and committees established by this council are primarily accountable to the National Executive Council in the discharge of their functions and in the exercise of their powers.¹² The council comprises the following representatives: National officers of the Council, one representative from each state council, co-opted members from the General Assembly, they must not exceed one tenth of the total membership of the National Executive Council.¹³

The Standing Committees: The Council constitutes various standing and ad-hoc committees that are saddled with different responsibilities from time to time based on demand and necessities. The Council's Standing Committees are as follows:

- a. Elders Committee
- b. *Fatwa* (legal opinion) Committee
- c. Finance Committee
- d. *Da'wah* Committee
- e. Research and Policy Committee
- f. Youth and Social Welfare Committee
- g. Media Committee
- h. International Relations Committee
- i. Economic Affairs Committee
- j. Legal Affairs Committee
- k. Pilgrims Committee¹⁴

The State Councils: Each state of the federation as well the Federal Capital Territory constitutes a state council, which comprises all Muslim communities, Islamic organisations and individual Muslims within the state. The State Council administers the Islamic affairs of the state in accordance with the structure specified for the council at the national level with necessary modifications from time to time.¹⁵

The Local Committees: Each state council is empowered to establish a committee of the Council in each local government area, district, town, village and ward in accordance

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Article 6 of the NSCIA Constitution.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Article 10 of the NSCIA Constitution.

¹⁵ See Article 11 of the NSCIA Constitution.

with a structure suitable to its circumstances. However, this should be done with adherence to the Council's rules and regulations guiding such activities.¹⁶

Zonal Offices and Zonal Consultative Committees: The Council currently has six (6) zonal offices with a zonal consultative committee for each zone. Each zone is managed by a director, who also serves as a secretary to the Zonal Consultative Committee. The composition of the zones is as follows:

Zone One: Sokoto, Katsina, Kano, Kaduna, Kebbi, Jigawa and Zamfara States.

Zone Two: Borno, Adamawa, Bauchi, Yobe, Gombe and Taraba States.

Zone Three: Abuja (FCT), Niger, Kwara and Kogi States.

Zone Four: Plateau, Benue and Nasarawa States.

Zone Five: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Edo, Osun and Ekiti States.

Zone Six: Anambra, Imo, Rivers, Cross-River, Abia, Delta, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Ebonyi and Enugu States.¹⁷

National Officers of the NSCIA and their Functions

There are a number of offices occupied by distinguished appointed or elected personalities to pilot the affairs of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs at the national level. These officers are:

- a. President-General
- b. Two Deputy Presidents-General (1&2)
- c. Vice Presidents-General
- d. Secretary General
- e. National Treasurer
- f. National Legal Adviser
- g. Two Deputy Secretaries-General (1&2)
- h. Chairmen of Standing Committees¹⁸

Appointment and selection of these officers are based on the laid down guidelines in the Council's constitution, which stipulate that the sitting Sultan of Sokoto, also known as *Sarkin Muslumi*, shall be invited to assume the headship of the Council as its President-General.¹⁹ The office of the First Deputy President-General is also reserved for the sitting Shehu of Borno, while the Second Deputy President-General is elected by the General Assembly from the Southern part of the country.²⁰ Each State Council is given the privilege of nominating a Vice President-General for appointment by the General Assembly for a renewable term of three (3) years. Each of the other officers is selected by the General Assembly for a renewable term of three (3) years. In other words, the tenure of the

¹⁶ See Article 12 of the NSCIA Constitution.

¹⁷ See Article 13 of the NSCIA Constitution.

¹⁸ See: Article 14 of the NSCIA Constitution.

¹⁹ See: Article 15 of the NSCIA Constitution.

²⁰ Ibid.

President-General and the First Deputy President-General may be regarded as life tenure, except in case where they are incapacitated or deposed from the throne.²¹ The National Executive Council temporarily fills any vacant office, which is subsequently ratified by the General Assembly.²² Any individual aspiring to be appointed to any of the offices must be of sound moral character, credibility, commitment and dedication to the cause of Islam and the general welfare of the Muslim *Ummah*.²³

As enshrined in the Council's constitution and due to circumstances that prevail from time to time, the national officers of NSCIA perform various functions determined by their portfolios. The President-General, or, in absentia, the First Deputy President-General or one of the Vice Presidents-General, takes the chair at all meetings of the General Assembly and the National Executive Council.²⁴ The Secretary General acts as the Secretary to both the General Assembly and the National Executive Council. He is also saddled with the responsibility of having the custody of the Council Seal and administers the Secretariat of the Council. To ensure effective implementation of Council decisions, he is empowered to constitute an implementation committee consisting of the following members: The Secretary General (Chairman), two Deputy Secretaries-General (1&2), Six Zonal Directors, National Treasurer, National Legal Adviser, Administrative Director-General, and a maximum of five members of staff of the Council as the National Executive Council may deem fit to appoint.²⁵

The National Treasurer is empowered to bank all the Council's monies, maintains proper account books and conducts all the financial affairs of the Council. He is also required to submit a written up-to-date statement of accounts at every meeting of the General Assembly and the National Executive Council, or whenever required. He is mandated to present audited accounts of the Council to the two aforementioned bodies thirty days before the dates of their meetings.²⁶

The Chairmen of Standing Committees preside at the meeting of their respective committees. However, in the absence of a chairman, or his deputy, the concerned committee may select any of its members to preside at the meeting.²⁷ The Legal Adviser, who is the official Chief Adviser to the Council on legal matters, renders from time to time appropriate legal advice to the Council, its officers and agencies.²⁸ The Deputy Secretary-General assists the Secretary-General in administrating the secretariat, and performs any other duties that may be assigned to him from time to time by the Secretary-General.²⁹

²¹ Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, the 18th Sultan of Sokoto, who doubled as the President-General of the NSCIA was deposed by the late General Sani Abacha in April, 1996 and thus ceased to be the President-General, while the late Alhaji Muhammad Maccido, who succeeded him automatically, became the President-General.

²² See Article 15 of the NSCIA Constitution.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Article 16 of the NSCIA Constitution.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Some of the Activities of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs

The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs engages in numerous activities that are related to religious, health, educational and political matters. Some of those activities are discussed below:

Mediating in Sectarian Differences among Muslims

As Islam directs the Muslims all over the world to be united, regardless of their colour, race or origin, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs tries to unite the Nigerian Muslims under one umbrella in accordance with Allah's directives in the Glorious Qur'an:

And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allah (i.e. This Qur'an), and be not divided among yourselves, and remember Allah's Favour on you, for you were enemies one to another but He joined your hearts together, so that, by His Grace, you became brethren (in Islamic Faith).³⁰

And be not as those who divided and differed among themselves after the clear proofs had come to them. It is they for whom there is an awful torment.³¹

He also reiterates in another *Surah* that:

The believers are nothing else than brothers (in Islamic religion). So make reconciliation between your brothers, and fear Allah, that you may receive mercy.³²

And obey Allah and his Messenger, and do not dispute (with one another) lest you lose courage and your strength depart, and be patient. Surely, Allah is with those who are *As-Sabirun* (the patient ones, etc.).³³

Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. was reported to have said:

...be brothers in the services of Allah, a Muslim is a brother to another Muslim...³⁴

Regrettably, despite the availability of these divine directives urging the Muslims to be united, the issue of unity among the Nigerian Muslims may be described in the words of Adegbite as a "dismal failure".³⁵ It is disheartening to note that the Nigerian Muslims, despite their numeric advantage, continue to lag behind and fail to play active role in some national issues, which in turn plays a significant role in intra and inter-religious conflicts.

³⁰ Surah al-'Imran, 103.

³¹ Surah, al-'Imran, 105.

³² Surah al-Hujurat, 10.

³³ Surah al-Anfal, 46.

³⁴ Hajjaj, M. *Sahih Muslim*, (New Delhi: Musrat Ali Nasri, 1978), vol. 12, 426, hadith no. 4650.

³⁵ See Abdul-Lateef Adegbite, "Unity of the Nigerian Ummah: An Imperative for the 21st Century".

This is largely because of this very disunity, which is attributed to a number of factors, notably; doctrinal differences, historical and social variations, as well as cultural and political circumstances.³⁶ Disappointingly, Adegbite argues, after half a century of the existence of an entity called Nigeria, “we are still talking today of northern and southern Muslims.”³⁷

Sensitisation on Religious Tolerance and peaceful Co-existence

The Council also embarks on sensitising the Nigerian Muslims and other members of the public on religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence with their neighbours. In realising this, the leadership of the NSCIA avails itself of every opportunity to preach peaceful co-existence and religious tolerance. The President-General of the Council, and the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhammad Sa’d Abubakar, is at the forefront of this campaign. An instance of such admonition was the latter’s appeal for stronger peaceful co-existence among the various ethnic groups in the country, where individuals can live freely in any part of the country without fear of molestation. He made the plea in Asaba, the Delta State capital, at a function hosted by the state government in 2007 for the delegation of traditional rulers from the North and retired and serving military generals.³⁸ In 2010, the Sultan also reiterated the same message in Abeokuta, Ogun State capital, where he emphasised that there is no way Nigeria can build a truly functional, dynamic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society without establishing the bonds of partnership and understanding with other religions and communities.³⁹ In addition to this, the NSCIA organises series of meetings and symposia to sensitise members of the public on the need for peaceful co-existence with their neighbours in all the six geo-political zones of the country. In the same vein, as result of security challenges the country passes through in recent times, due to *Boko haram* insurgency, the NSCIA liaises with other religious bodies both Muslims and Christians to admonish Nigerians to be their brothers’ keepers. It maintains that “violence begets violence.” Which means whatever the grievances of any group, dialogue still remains the best tool to settle misunderstanding. Therefore, if anyone uses the banner of Islam to cause trouble, kill or maim innocent members of the public is against the teaching of Islam.

Announcement of Commencement and Termination of Ramadan

Being the highest Islamic organisation in the country, the NSCIA is also saddled with the responsibility of announcing the commencement and termination of the annual Ramadan fast. On every 28th day of the Muslim month of *Sha’ban*, the President General of the NSCIA, the Sultan of Sokoto urges Muslims to start to lookout for the new crescent of the month of *Ramadan* from the next day. Contact numbers of Muslim leaders from different zones and states are usually given out through the media for easy communication in case the crescent is sighted in any part of the country, or elsewhere in the Muslim world. In 2010 and subsequent years, binoculars were distributed by the NSCIA to some people to enhance visibility of the crescent. When the new moon is sighted, the Sultan formally makes

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See *Daily Champion*, July 23, 2007.

³⁹ See allAfrica.com< <http://allafrica.com/stories/200707231006.html>> (accessed, October 24, 2010). Also see *Nigerian Compass*, January 1, 2010.

through the electronic and other media a nationwide announcement for the commencement of Ramadan.

Supervision of Hajj Operation

Although, a special commission has been established by the Federal Government to oversee the annual Hajj operation in the country, the NSCIA, being the highest religious body that is closer to the prospective pilgrims, acts as an intermediary between the intending pilgrims, the National Hajj Commission and the Federal Government. It supervises the activities of the commission, and advises the authority on how best the operation can be handled to the satisfaction of all the stakeholders. Nevertheless, the Hajj operation in Nigeria has been characterised year in, year out with a lot of irregularities, such as late departure and late arrival,⁴⁰ poor feeding and accommodation in the holy land, lack of sufficient and efficient aircraft to convey the pilgrims⁴¹ and luggage loss, to mention a few. As a result of all bottlenecks associated with the operation, wealthy intending pilgrims have in many occasions resorted to making arrangement with neighbouring countries to perform the annual rite, while the less privileged have to endure the situation. However, since the restructuring of the Hajj Commission and its transformation into the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON) and the involvement of the Supreme Council under the leadership of Sultan Muhammad Sa'd Abubakar, the situation has steadily and considerably improved. Moreover, the Federal Government has also heeded the religious leaders' advice not to politicise the pilgrimage exercise,⁴² by appointing the Presidents of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the Christian Association of Nigeria as the permanent leaders of the pilgrimage operations to Makkah and Jerusalem respectively.⁴³

In the same vein, the Council has also been forthcoming in its mediation between the authority and the intending pilgrims on many occasions. For example, when the Federal Government jacked up the Hajj fare in 2008, the public severely criticised this action, which it viewed as a deliberate and insensitive attempt by the government to prevent the less privileged Nigerians from performing the Hajj. Thus, the NSCIA intervened to sensitise the entire Nigerian Muslims that the price hike was inevitable due to what it called "natural phenomena", which the Hajj Commission had no control over. The Council cited as one of the factors of the increasing cost, hike in accommodation in Saudi Arabia following the demolition of all old structures around the two Holy Mosques on the orders of the Saudi Government.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the Council admonished the authorities to fear the

⁴⁰ Nigeria used to pay surcharges every year to the Saudi Arabian Government for late arrival of her pilgrims to the holy land.

⁴¹ In 2006, over 36,000 intending pilgrims who had paid all necessary fees could not be airlifted to the holy land due to shortage of aircraft. The NSCIA strongly criticised the Federal Government and advised it to put in place a befitting commission to replace the moribund body. This bold move by the Council later paved the way for the establishment of the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON). (See *Vanguard*, January 9, 2006. "Hajj: NSCIA Blames FG for Failed Airlift of Pilgrims").

⁴² Previously, the Federal Government used to appoint *Amir al-Hajj* and the leader of Christian pilgrims without given preference to dedication of the persons involved to religion. In fact, it got to a point when the leadership of pilgrims is appointed as compensation to political loyalists of the ruling party, notwithstanding the commitment and dedication of such persons to the religion and their competence to shoulder the enormous responsibilities.

⁴³ For more on the appointment of religious leaders as heads of pilgrimage delegation, see *The Punch*, October 22, 2010. "CAN president, Sultan to lead FG's delegations".

⁴⁴ See *The Punch*, August 8, 2008. "NSCIA defends hajj commission on fare hike".

Almighty by rendering services that commensurate with the fare collected from the pilgrims, and to do their utmost best to ameliorate their suffering in the holy land.⁴⁵

At this juncture, it is important to state that the activities of the NSCIA are not confined to the Muslim community and religious functions alone. Rather, they transcend those boundaries to other matters relating to all Nigerians and the entire nation. Thereby, Council actively participates in a number of national issues ranging from health, security, education to political matters. Enumerating some of those activities may go a long way in familiarising the reader with the other side of the coin.

Sensitisation on Health, Security and Political Issues

The NSCIA is in the vanguard of the awareness campaign on the HIV/AIDS pandemic to sensitise Muslims, and, indeed, Nigerian populace, on the danger of the deadly disease. The Council also partners national and international stakeholders, such as the National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Bank, among others, for a wider coverage of the campaign in all the nooks and crannies of the country. A typical example of such programmes was the five-day HIV/AIDS Training for Trainers Workshop, conducted in January, 2010 in 12 States of the federation, including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, which was financed by the World Bank in collaboration with the NSCIA. The project, which was organised by AIDS Programme for Muslim *Ummah* (APMU), targeted the Muslim communities, especially women and religious leaders to purposely sensitise them on the danger associated with this dreadful disease, as well as how to prevent and handle the scourge. The 12 affected States include Ogun, Osun, Rivers, Enugu, Imo, Edo, Jigawa, Kano, Borno, Bauchi, Nasarawa and the FCT.⁴⁶ Similarly, after the controversies associated with the polio vaccine were settled by the relevant stakeholders, the Council also spearheaded the campaign for the immunisation against polio and other child-killer diseases.⁴⁷

On security of lives and property, the NSCIA has from time to time condemned the spate of insecurity in the country and advised the government to be proactive in curbing the menace.⁴⁸ It has also advised the authority on the way out of the logjam currently being experienced in the nation's electoral process. This is contained in the far-reaching communiqué issued by the Council in June, 2008 at the end of the Civil Society Consultation on Electoral Reforms, which was jointly sponsored the Joint Donor Basket Fund (JDBF), the EU, DFID, CIDA and UNDP. The Council observed numerous devastating practices on the Nigerian electoral processes such as the absence of God fearing consciousness in public life, which undermines the credibility of the electoral system. Political leaders, according to the Council, fuel electoral malpractices with impunity. It also

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See Nigeriadailynews.com, January 4, 2010, "World Bank, NSCIA sponsor HIV/AIDS projects in Nigeria," <<http://ndn.nigeriadailynews.com/templates/?a=21927>> (accessed 13 January, 2011).

⁴⁷ It was alleged that the anti-polio vaccine in use in the country contains the deadly HIV/AIDS Virus, and could also cause infertility. As a result of these allegations, some state governments in the north stood against the application of the vaccine. The controversy was, however, resolved after a thorough investigation in leading laboratories within and outside the country to ascertain the claim. See *This Day*, November 24, 2003. Also see Baffa, A. U. *Child Immunisation: Muslim Reactions in Northern Nigeria*, (Kano: Government Printer, 2006), 85-107.

⁴⁸ Amin Igwegbe, Interview by Author, NSCIA Headquarters, Abuja, 10th – 11th June, 2010. Also see *Vanguard*, March 8, 2004.

argues that security agents openly take sides, while electoral fraud is not punished. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Council observes, is very reluctant to perform its functions impartially or to assert its independence, and gullible and pliable electorate help unwittingly to produce sham and incompetent leaders.⁴⁹

Challenges Facing the NSCIA

Like any other non-governmental organisations, the NSCIA faces numerous challenges in its efforts in uniting Nigerian Muslims. Some of these challenges are as old as the organisation, while some are contemporary ones, which could be attributed to some lapses in the Council's approach to issues. Some of the challenges are discussed below.

Disunity among Muslims

Among such challenges regarded as old as the Council is disunity among Muslims across the length and breadth of the country. Being fully aware of inhibiting factors militating against the unity of the Nigerian Muslims, the Council's leadership is working round the clock to bridge the gap. It, for example formed a committee at the end of its National Executive Council (NEC) meeting held in Kaduna between 30th May and 1st June, 2010, to mediate in the age old rift between the *Izalah* and the *Tariqah* groups. This committee is made up of the following prominent personalities: His Highness Alhaji (Dr) Shehu Idris, Emir of Zazzau (Chairman), His Highness Alhaji Muhammad Awwal Ibrahim, Emir of Suleja, His Highness Alhaji Muhammad Nuhu Sanusi, Emir of Dutse, Alhaji Usman Faruk, Jarman Gombe, Sheikh Ahmad Lemu, Sheikh Abdulaziz Yusuf and Dr. Salisu Shehu (Secretary).⁵⁰ The Council's drive in bringing the different parties among Nigerian Muslims together is a commendable effort and a step in the right direction. However, the Council had dragged its feet too long to wade into the rift. It is on record that some diehard *Tariqah* and *Izalah* members allegedly voted for non-Muslims during elections. It was gathered that such disgruntled people did not vote for non-Muslims as a result of quality they possess but are lacking in Muslim candidates but to demonstrate their hatred for each other.

Religious Bigotry

Intolerance has become a major problem among religious groups in the country. The Council's drive on religious tolerance needs to be taken to the next level. It should go beyond speeches and condemnation of the perpetrators of religious bigotry, but should be more practical in order to avert senseless killing and maiming of innocent people as well as destruction of property in "the name of religion". Findings revealed that the bane of the perennial communal riots is a resultant breakdown of family structure and values, which breeds *yandaba*, or area boys, who are instrumental in perpetuating religious unrest. The NSCIA should take practical steps to make their members realise that leaving their wards "to whom it may concern" in the name of acquiring traditional Qur'anic education is not

⁴⁹ For more on the observations and recommendations of the Council, see the communiqué of the Civil Society Consultation on Electoral Reforms with the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, jointly sponsored by the Joint Donor Basket Fund JDBF, the EU, DFID, CIDA and UNDP.

⁵⁰ See the Communiqué Issued at the end of the NSCIA's National Executive Council (NEC) meeting, held between 30th May and 1st June, 2010 at the Conference hall of the *Jamaa' tu Nasr al-Islam*, Kaduna.

condoned by Islam. The pupils of these Qur'anic schools are often used by heretical leaders and unscrupulous politicians as foot shouldered to destabilise the country.

Misinterpretation and Misapplication of Religious Texts

Another challenge being faced by the Council is misinterpretation and misapplication of religious texts by some scholars who play to the gallery and their followers. The NSCIA and, indeed, the Muslim leaders are not doing enough to educate their members on the correct interpretation of some religious texts, especially the concept of the *Jihad*. Many "lay Muslims" believe that unjustly harassing and intimidating and even killing non-Muslims is a "free ticket" to paradise.⁵¹ This erroneous understanding may be related to a *hadith* narrated by Abu Hurayrah r.a.:

Three categories of people are among the first to enter the Hell-Fire on the Day of Resurrection: ... then the third will be brought and would say: Oh Allah! I went out and gallantly fought for your sake without turning back on my heel until I was killed, and Allah would say: you lied, verily you fought so that people can say: what a courageous and a brave man, and they have said, so take him to Hell-Fire.⁵²

Rather than leaving Muslims of this calibre to continue to swim in the ocean of ignorance and intellectual sterility by their clinging to the so-called "*Jihad*" for a free ticket to paradise, Islamic scholars, and, indeed, the NSCIA should go the extra mile to educate the young people, who are mostly at the forefront of this flawed understanding, of the famous prophetic tradition narrated by Sahal bin Sa'd and reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim:

Sahal bin Sa'd al-Sa'idi narrates that when the Prophet s.a.w. appointed 'Ali bin Abi Talib as an administrator to Khaybar and gave him the flag, 'Ali said to the Prophet s.a.w.: Should I fight them until they become like us? The Messenger of Allah replied: "Be patient until you reach their courtyard, call them to Islam and inform them of what Allah made obligatory on them. I swear by Allah, if Allah makes you a cause for someone's guidance, it is better for you than to have herds of red camels."⁵³

The above prophetic traditions underscore the importance Islam attaches to humility and modesty in carrying out *Da'wah* activities by making the religion appeal to people than being harsh and to always go on the offensive.

⁵¹ The Author reliably gathered from an eye witness that an *Imam* was nearly lynched by such "*Jihadists*" at a mosque in Jos; after one of the daytime congregational prayers, some youth suspected to be *yandaba* (hoodlums) started shouting; *Jihad! Jihad!!* The *Imam* cautioned and warned them of the consequences of their action. When they realised that he was not in support of their calling for "holy war", they reportedly said: "*zamu fara dakai*" (we shall start (the *Jihad*) with you). The timely intervention of elders and other people around actually saved the day.

⁵² 'Ali bin Hisam, *Kanz al-'Amal fi Sunan al-Aqwal wa al-Af'al*, (Riyadh: Bayt al-Afkar al-Dawliyyah, 1999), Chapter two deeds and morals, vol. 3, 480.

⁵³ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

Lack of Proactive on Contemporary Issues

The Council strives to ensure uniformity in religious rites in the country, which led adoption of various methods. The above measures on moon sighting are all taken by the Council to ensure uniformity. Nevertheless, the commencement and termination of the annual Ramadan fast has, unfortunately, never been uniform in the country for so many years. Similarly, Nigeria also differs from most Muslim countries in this respect. In 2001 and 2008, the phenomenon had also affects the *'Id al-Adha* (Greater Bairam). Most part of the country celebrated the Greater Bairam on *'Arafah* day.⁵⁴ This may not be unconnected with the above discussed unity and leadership hitches, which constitute a drawback to the NSCIA's efforts to achieve uniformity in these annual rites as stipulated in the aims and objectives of the Council; "to ensure uniform observance of Islamic rites, including festivals throughout the Federation of Nigeria."⁵⁵ However, except for few individuals, the 2010 and 2011 Ramadan may be described as an exception, as the majority of the Muslim faithful throughout the country commenced and terminated their Ramadan fast on the days announced by the NSCIA, which also correspond with the majority of Muslim countries around the world. This achievement seems to have materialised largely because of the Council's drive to organise National Forum of Islamic Scholars on moon-sighting in all the geo-political zones of the country.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the moon sighting committee of the Council needs to be more proactive on this issue. Running helter-skelter few weeks to the commencement of Ramadan speaks volumes about the creativity and attitude of the committee in handling this enormous task. The committee should liaise with its counterparts in other parts of the Muslim world to update its knowledge on the current trend with regard to the moon sighting. This could also afford the committee the opportunity to have access to and possibly acquire state-of-the-art equipment on this matter to forestall the controversy that usually trail the NSCIA's announcement of the moon sighting.

On the hitches that are always attributed to logistics and other bureaucracies with regard to the annual Hajj rite that usually turn the excitement of the Nigerian pilgrims to nightmare year in, year out, the issue should be properly addressed to minimise the untold hardship usually faced by the pilgrims. The NSCIA should advice the authority, and indeed, the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON) on the need to always avoid the fire brigade approach to issue related to this annual rite. Early preparations should be put in place in order to detect any possible problems as early as possible so as to proffer adequate solutions on time. Liaising with other Hajj authorities in other parts of the Muslim world and exchanging ideas could also be a rewarding adventure to minimise the problems faced by all the stakeholders.

The steps taken by the NSCIA on political and other issues may be arguably seen as a right step in the right direction, because some of the communal conflicts that have ravaged the country were directly or indirectly traced to political manoeuvrings of unscrupulous politicians. Nonetheless, it could be more appropriate if the Council could advice the authorities to be more consistent in their policies. Findings revealed that policy

⁵⁴ Muhammad Sani Isa, *Eid on Arafat Day and Moon Sighting: Towards Resolving the Controversies*, (Kano: Triumph Publishing Company Ltd, 2008), 4.

⁵⁵ See NSCIA's objectives.

⁵⁶ See *The Nation*, July 12, 2009.

of inconsistency and retrogressive progression of the Nigerian educational system often lead to mass failure, school dropouts and joblessness. Some of the school dropouts and jobless youths are later initiated into heretical sects and political thuggery. If successive governments in the country can be persuaded not to scrap any policy initiated by their predecessors, especially when found to be working properly, this could save the nation all sorts of wastage and start afresh syndrome that occasioned the stagnation of the country in recent times.

The above scenarios suggest that the NSCIA is yet to achieve its laudable objectives as set out in its constitution. Below are some of the impediments identified as the stumbling blocks preventing the effectiveness of the Council.

1. Unlike its counterpart, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the organisational structures of the NSCIA at the state and local government levels were discovered to apparently exist on paper, and not physically on ground, or at least, if physically exist, they are arguably not functioning at the moment. In other words, the grassroots branches of the NSCIA, which are closer to the flashpoints and in the best position to have the firsthand gist of any misunderstanding among the Muslims and their neighbours, are currently dormant.
2. May be due to lack of proper publicity about the activities of the NSCIA, some Muslims alleged that the major role play by the NSCIA in the country – to the best of their knowledge, is the announcement of commencement and termination of Ramadan fast. This assertion buttresses the earlier observation about the inactiveness of the organisation at the grassroots.
3. Lack of adequate mechanism for *fatwa* on contemporary issues is another source of confusion that usually afford some self-acclaimed “*Muftis*” to issue *fatwa* and counter *fatwa*, which occasionally gives room for “half-baked scholars” or even politicians to issue emotional statements on religious matters. Example of this was the “*fatwa*” issued by a politician in Zamfara State in 2002 over an article published in the This Day Newspaper without due consultation with the highest religious authorities in the country.⁵⁷
4. The current selection procedure for the appointment of the President General of the NSCIA is problematic on many fronts. Though not presently having serious impact on religious affairs in the country. However, it may have in future due to the following reasons: a) according to the NSCIA constitution, the sitting Sultan of Sokoto, who by law, is partially enthroned by the government automatically assumes the captainship of the entire Nigerian Muslim’s vessel notwithstanding his background in religious knowledge;⁵⁸ b) the Sultan, and by virtue of his position,

⁵⁷ A spokesperson for the Zamfara State Government declared that the author of the article should be killed, while the *Jamaa’tu Nasr al-Islam* (JNI) issued a counter statement denouncing the action of the state authority. See HighBeam Research, “Fatwa issued on Miss World writer,” <<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-94659739.html>> (accessed 28 January, 2011). Also see Beliefnet, “Nigerian Islamic Body Overrules ‘Fatwa’ Against Writer of Miss World Article,” <<http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2002/12/Nigerian-Islamic-Body-Overrules-Fatwa-Against-Writer-Of-Miss-World-Article.aspx>> (accessed 16 February, 2011).

⁵⁸ Some people may argue that since there are different committees responsible for various issues, as well as the availability of reputable scholars, the President General of the NSCIA may not necessarily need to be vast in religious knowledge. Such argument is refuted by the fact that the early Muslim leaders were not contented

the leader of the Nigerian Muslims can thereby be deposed if situation warrants, by politicians as in the case of Sultan Ibrahim Dasuki;⁵⁹ and c) the head of the Nigerian Muslims appears like leadership by adoption and not by choice. In other words, the entire Nigerian Muslims do not have a free hand in the appointment of their leader. Furthermore, this structure may give room for compromise on the part of the President General if his throne is threatened by conflict of interests in terms loyalty question to the Muslims and politicians.

5. Unlike the Christian Association of Nigeria, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs has been less active in addressing issues of concern to Nigerian Muslims, apparently basking on the activities of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which is seen by many as a puppet of the authorities.⁶⁰
6. Lack of Islamic media outfit to educate Muslim youths on the correct practice of their religion and counter sensationalism on issues reported about Islam and Muslims by the state and private media.
7. To the best of my knowledge, the NSCIA does not have a functional website, which speaks volumes about its creativity. Lack of such foresight in having a homepage where members of the public can have access to information about the activities of the Council is a serious oversight in this technological era. The impact of social networks such as facebook, twitter, etc, in affording people from different parts of the world the opportunity of sharing ideas and offering valuable advice on issues of interest cannot be over emphasised.

Conclusion

This paper tried to examine some of the achievements and challenges facing the NSCIA. The paper has arguably proven that the Council has recorded some accomplishments in its efforts to unity Nigerian Muslims. Similarly, it unveiled some of the challenges militating against it. The paper thereby submits that in order for the NSCIA to be more efficient and address numerous challenges posed by contemporary issues, rigorous reforms are required within the organization in order to be better positioned to win the recognition and unflinching support of most Nigerian Muslims regardless of their group affiliation. Interestingly, this view had apparently been acknowledged by the Secretary General of the Council, who reiterated at one occasion:

Efforts are currently on to reposition NSCIA itself for better performance. A Technical Committee has submitted a report with far-reaching

with the presence of numerous scholars in various branches of knowledge around them, but also did their best to acquire religious knowledge to acceptable standard to enable them fit in properly in the position they occupied. In addition, a glance at the life of Sheikh Uthman dan Fodio will buttress this point. However, since it has become the tradition that the Sultan of Sokoto automatically becomes the leader of the Nigerian Muslims, grooming the prospective “future Sultans” in all-rounded education to comfortably shoulder this enormous responsibility could go a long way in addressing this issue.

⁵⁹ Sultan Ibrahim Dasuki was deposed by the late General Sani Abacha in April, 1996.

⁶⁰ Author’s personal interviews with some villagers in Zaria, Kaduna State, as well as some rural areas in Kano State between 8th and 15th May, 2010.

recommendations. Zonal meetings are being arranged across the country to deliberate on the proposed reforms.⁶¹

In the same vein, there must be paradigm shift in the way the Council conducts its business. In other words, the NSCIA must urgently address the issues raised by this paper to forestall further crack among Nigerian Muslims and strive to bridge the gulf occasioned by group aspirations and ethnic barriers.

Recommendations

1. The NSCIA should as a matter of urgency intensify its efforts to unite the Nigerian Muslims, who are divided along historic, doctrinal, personal and group aspirations. If this is truly achieved, it will pave the way for a better understanding of the religion, and, above all, check heretical groups and call them to order, thus reducing intra and inter religious conflicts to the barest minimum.
2. The *Fatwa* Committee of the NSCIA should rise up to the formidable challenges posed by contemporary issues in the country and be proactive so as to avoid the repeat of what happened in 2002 where ‘*fatwa*’ and counter ‘*fatwa*’ were issued on the same issue from different quarters.⁶²
3. It is observed that whenever inter-religious dialogue or symposia on peaceful co-existence are organised, they are customarily confined to the ranks of scholars and religious leaders. This laudable effort should be extended to all and sundry at the grassroots, because it is these “lay members” of society that need more enlightenment for wider impact. Similarly, such forums should be conducted in local languages to attract wider participation and contributions from experienced persons who may not be able to communicate effectively in English.
4. The NSCIA should endeavour to establish a scholarship scheme for brilliant needy Muslim students to further their studies. This will minimise the figure of school dropouts as result of poverty.
5. The Council should as a matter of urgency launch a website that will showcase its activities and keep members of the public abreast of issues relating to Islam and Muslims in Nigeria.
6. Since the media in the country is controlled by non-Muslims, there is always bias in the way issues related to Islam and Muslims are presented to the members of the public. The NSCIA should establish a befitting media outfit to correct the wrong perception created by the media about Islam and Muslims.

⁶¹ Extract from the address delivered by the Secretary General of the NSCIA, Dr. Abdul-Lateef Adegbite at the opening ceremony of the National Seminar of the Council of the Muslim Organisations (CMO), held in Ilorin, Kwara State capital on 24th -25th April, 2009.

⁶² A spokesperson for the Zamfara State Government declared that the author of a blasphemous article should be killed, while the *Jamaa’tu Nasr al-Islam* (JNI) issued a counter statement denouncing the action of the state authority. See HighBeam Research, “Fatwa issued on Miss World writer,” <<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-94659739.html>> (accessed 28 January, 2011). Also see Beliefnet, “Nigerian Islamic Body Overrules ‘Fatwa’ Against Writer of Miss World Article,” <<http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2002/12/Nigerian-Islamic-Body-Overrules-Fatwa-Against-Writer-Of-Miss-World-Article.aspx>> (accessed 16 February, 2011).

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