

Introduction

Welcome to the third issue of the *Christian-Muslim News Digest* for 2015. This issue looks at how political and religious leaders have been promoting interreligious harmony in Nigeria to combat the violent ideology of Boko Haram. It also features an update on the controversy over the ban on interfaith marriages in Indonesia.

Promoting interreligious harmony in Nigeria in response to Boko Haram

Nigeria's new president, Muhammadu Buhari, has acted quickly to fulfill his campaign promise to eradicate Boko Haram, rescue the hundreds of women and girls captured by the militants, and restore peace and security to the region. Less than two weeks into his presidency, he brokered an agreement with leaders of neighboring countries and a joint military force from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria began a new offensive against Boko Haram in July. The violence from this militant group, which has been trying to impose its radical version of Islam for several years, has killed 13,000 and displaced 1.5 million people from their homes. Boko Haram recently stepped up its attacks in northeast Nigeria, as well as in neighboring Niger and Chad. In a country that is nearly equally divided between Muslims and Christians, interreligious tensions have contributed to the current crisis in Nigeria. However, as Prince Bola Ajibola, Nigeria's former Attorney General and Minister of Justice, put it, 'religion, politics, and ethnicity [are intertwined] and the three are beclouded with corruption, poverty and insecurity'. The recently elected Buhari has acknowledged this and has been appealing to religious sentiment in efforts to bring peace.

As Muslims began Ramadan in June, President Buhari and governors from several states asked Muslims to use the holy month to pray for peaceful coexistence and religious harmony across Nigeria. Leaders in several majority Christian states made a similar plea at Easter, asking Christians to follow the example of Jesus Christ on the path of peace. In Borno State, where Boko Haram was founded, Islamic leaders have initiated a program to teach peace and tolerance in Islamic schools, in order to stop the spread of the militant group's violent ideology. Heads of state and religious leaders from across Africa, in cooperation with the Nigerian Inter-religious Council, resolved in early June to hold a large interreligious, cultural conference in Nigeria in 2017. The focus would be on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, as a means to solve the crisis and bring healing to Nigeria, as well as reduce tensions in other African nations.

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Commentary Rev Dr Johnson Mbillah, *General Advisor, Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA)*

Politically, Nigeria made history when it replaced a sitting president through democratic means. It is understood that one of the prime factors that made this possible was the failure of President Goodluck Jonathan's government to defeat Boko Haram and the campaign pledge of Muhammadu Buhari, the new president of Nigeria, to eradicate the group and restore peace and security in the country.

The seeming road map set by Buhari to militarily eradicate the group comes in his statement that Boko Haram is not only a Nigerian problem, since its politico-religious ideology has spread beyond Nigeria's borders and is now active in neighbouring Chad, northern Cameroon and Niger. His declared intent to involve and fight the group along with others, has received express support from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS is concerned that the ideological framework under which Boko Haram operates is in solidarity with that of *Ansar al-Din* who are active in northern Mali and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), which has declared its intention to spread its activities in the region.

On the political front the resolve of Buhari to rid Nigeria of Boko Haram will be judged by his success in doing so and not merely by his determination and commitment to do so, since his predecessor Goodluck Jonathan promised and failed to do it, and got accused of not having lived up to his name and rather brought what critics call 'badluck' to Nigeria.

It is well known that in the particularity of Boko Haram (as it is with groups of its nature) cogent issues that inform its actions are the perceptions that current **Political, Religious, Economic and Social** agendas of states are totally wrong. Who can fix that? They alone can do it. A move to crush Boko Haram militarily, if that is at all possible, will not provide a sustainable solution to the challenge that Nigeria faces. The philosophy of Boko Haram could live on and be revived by others in the future.

What is crucial in this fight is for the Buhari government to live up to its commitment to adopt a comprehensive approach that seeks to make politics inclusive among the about 350 different ethnic groups in Nigeria; involve the Christian and Muslim religious leaders who are polarised and angered by Boko Haram's activities; fix the economy and deal with the much talked about corruption in high places.

On the religious front, Christians and Muslims cannot afford to be passive in the fight against Boko Haram since the foundation of violent extremism that seeks to kill, to maim, to displace, and to abduct is the mind set. This mind set is informed by a form of indoctrination carried out by

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leaders with religious leanings. To this end, Christian and Muslim communities need to embark on intra and inter-religious reorientation of minds to accept and respect plurality of views within religions and ensure that no one attempts to work the other out of existence as the ideological framework of Boko Haram threatens.

The continued controversy over the ban on interfaith marriages in Indonesia

Indonesia's Constitutional Court recently rejected a request for a judicial review of Article 2 of the 1974 Marriage Law, which effectively forbids interfaith marriage. The petition was filed last September by five individuals connected to the University of Indonesia Law School, and revealed divisions both across and within religions in Indonesia. The petitioners argued that Article 2 violates the Constitution and Pancasila (the five principles of Indonesian society) in that it prevents couples from freely practicing their respective religions by forcing them to choose only one religion as a basis for the marriage. In practice, Indonesians have for years found ways of going round the law. A common practice is for a couple to get married under one religion and then the spouses continue practicing their separate religions. Article 56 of the law allows for the recognition of marriages performed outside the country, as long as the couple is subsequently registered in Indonesia, and those with the financial means travel abroad to marry as a way of legitimizing their interfaith marriage.

Several religious leaders and organizations expressed their opinion in the lead-up to the recent court decision. The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Indonesian Communion of Churches stated in November that the law was problematic because it limited a person's right of choice with regard to religion and whom to marry. A representative of the Council for Confucian Religion in Indonesia expressed a similar view, stating that diversity in race, ethnicity, class, and/or religion should not be a consideration for marriage. By contrast, the Hindu Association of Indonesia stated it supported the law and that a non-Hindu should convert before marrying a Hindu. Opinions were mixed among Muslims. The Indonesian Ulema Council and Muhammadiyah, a large Muslim organization in the country, reported they firmly reject interfaith marriage. However, the Paramadina Foundation, along with some prominent Muslim scholars, such as Zainun Kamal, spoke in favor of interfaith marriage, noting that the Qur'an clearly allows Muslim men to marry Christian and Jewish women and is neutral on whether Muslim women can marry men of other faiths. As far back as 2001, a consortium was reportedly working on a bill to legalize interfaith marriage, and reactions following the court's recent ruling indicate this longstanding debate in Indonesia will not go away anytime soon. One of the petitioners alluded to the possibility of further legal action and the human rights organizations Imparsial and the Setara Institute derided the Constitutional Court for rejecting the judicial review.

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Commentary Dr Peter Riddell, *Vice Principal (Academic), Melbourne School of Theology*

I lived in Indonesia for several years during the 1980s, and have travelled back regularly to the country since that time. The period of the 1980s was characterised by comparatively relaxed relations between the faiths. Overt expressions of faith were not so pronounced as they are today. At the time, few Muslim women in professional or academic positions wore Muslim head-covering. Conversions between the faiths, especially from Islam to Christianity and vice versa, were in evidence and did not attract much comment. Moreover, I witnessed a number of interfaith marriages among colleagues and in the broader community. At the time, interfaith marriage seemed to be almost a non-issue.

Today the religious scene in Indonesia is very different. In offices, and in the street, the *jilbab* head-covering for Muslim women has become far more visible than in the 1980s. While conversions from other faiths to Islam are taking place, conversions away from Islam are far more controversial and, where they occur, tend to be kept very low-key. Interfaith marriage has become a highly contested topic, as seen from the events leading up to the recent decision by the Indonesian Constitutional Court.

What has happened to cause such dramatic changes over the last thirty years? A key contextual factor is the worldwide Islamist resurgence that has been in evidence since the 1970s. This resurgence has been characterised by an intra-Muslim struggle to shape the direction of the faith in diverse Muslim-majority locations.

Indonesia has not been immune from the pressures and polemics associated with Islamist resurgence. The Indonesian Islamic community is far from monolithic: it includes radicals, traditionalists, modernists, neo-modernists and a host of other groupings according to such commonly quoted labels. Islamist resurgence has nurtured a narrower brand of Islamic scriptural literalism that has empowered conservative voices across the Muslim world, including Indonesia.

Within this context of Islamist resurgence, observers should not mistake events such as the recent interfaith marriage debate in Indonesia as a conflict between Islam and other faiths. On the contrary, it is more a case of a tussle between competing Muslim voices, with other faiths caught up in the backwash.

The self-styled guardian of Muslim tradition, the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), staked its claim to represent the Islamic scholarly mainstream by affirming that Muslims should marry Muslims, not others. The Muhammadiyah, originally a Muslim modernist movement from whom a more inclusivist approach might have been hoped, felt pressured to argue a similar line in order to avoid being tarred with a liberal brush in an age where Islamic scriptural literalism has considerable momentum.

On the other side of the debate are found Human Rights groups, heavily staffed by Muslims, and genuinely liberal Muslim organisations such as the Paramadina Foundation who usually speak out in challenging the literalists. However, on the occasion of the interfaith marriage debate in particular, Paramadina chose to remain silent because of threats from radicals in the past.

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The contentious Article 2 of the 1974 Marriage Law has been around for a long time. The fact that it is creating more problems in 2015 than in 1985 shows that the problem is not necessarily in the detail of the Article but rather in today's context, where inclusivists, open-minded Muslims are struggling in the face of the conservative Islamist lobby that is pursuing a more narrow interpretation of Islam.

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