

Speech by Major General Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, Former Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Presidential Candidate of the All Nigeria's People's Party, at The Project on U.S. Policy towards the Middle East's Reception and Book Launch of Professor John N. Paden's ***Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflict Resolution: The Challenge of Democratic Federalism in Nigeria***

Nigeria: Democracy and Conflict Resolution

By

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Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank the conveners of this project most sincerely for their *very* kind invitation to me to participate in this *very* important discussion on Nigeria's experience in building democratic institutions.

For me it is such a great honor and a privilege to stand before this distinguished gathering at the Brookings Institution, this earliest and most famous of the think tanks in the United States of America.

I would also like to pay tribute to the originators of The Project on U.S. Policy –Towards the Islamic World. Designed to "examine how the United States can reconcile its efforts to eliminate terrorism and reduce the appeal of extremist movements with its need to build more positive relationships with Muslim states and communities.

To be sure, the catastrophic events of September 11 had changed many things in the way the United States government had viewed many things; including, unfortunately, changes in emphasis on which areas of the world to constructively engage. Several important areas have unwittingly become victims of this policy.

With severe cutbacks in diplomatic representation and quality, with stiff visa restrictions, which Paden had himself flayed elsewhere; and with the shift in US Government focus restricted to a potentially less important area of the Middle East and with the administration's seeming indifference to matters of great moment that lacked headline-grabbing potentials for clear

and immediately identifiable US interests, non-Arab Muslim areas have, as a result, been severely neglected.

To compound the situation, US government need for an ally in the war on terrorism had partially blinded it to all other policy options besides its single minded focus on the war.

Perhaps within the context of 9-11, that may be understandable in the short term, but over the long term, this is a policy that may need to be reassessed. US policymakers need to understand that, even under normal circumstances is a war that is very problematic, with potentials to get even more so as it is prosecuted, whether in the end it is won or lost.

Yet, even if, theoretically, the US succeeds in wiping out all pockets of terrorist insurgencies and neutralizes those counties it calls rogue states at the price of losing the entirety of the Muslim world, it 't/ill have gained nothing Of its endeavors.

That is why I believe the time has come for the U.S. government to refocus and open up meaningful dialogue on conflict resolution. This, I think, is the message Paden is trying to send to policy makers in his *Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflict resolution: The Challenge of Democratic Federalism in Nigeria*.

In that penetrating study, Paden identified a neglected Muslim community-the emirate states of Nigeria-that now needs to be reengaged. He gave due recognition to the quality and range of the emirate conflict resolution mechanisms, efforts and successes in defusing periodic tensions, and effectively checking the violence that has not infrequently erupted in the country.

No doubt, Nigeria is now an area of great and strategic importance to the US and is widely seen as crucial to the success of much of conflict resolution efforts in the Muslim World. The secret for this success lies in the emirate states' well known desire for peaceful coexistence, their capacity for tolerance and their varied experiences in past efforts in resolving crises.

Central to this success in conflict resolution is their adherence to Islamic principles in organizing society and in the pursuit for peace, and in the development of the appropriate civic culture based on their enduring faith in

democratic federalism.

While over the years other influences have prevailed to deny Nigeria a stable democratic civilian culture for the emirate states this is nothing to do with the famous, but unproved, claim that Islam and democracy are not compatible. It would indeed appear that for the emirate states, much or the talk about the incompatibility of Islam and democracy does not exist.

And even for those making the claim, the view is probably based more on the fear or misunderstanding of the essential nature of democracy and Islam than on facts.

As a system of governance, democracy provides for constitutionalism and consultation. In other words, it calls for respect for the popular will, separation of powers and the application of effective checks and balances on the exercise of that power. All this is supposed to be done within the context of the rule of law and assured equality of all people before the law which is guaranteed and applied by a judiciary that is independent.

Indeed the fact that the first written constitution in the world-long before the Magna Carta and more than 1000 years before the Constitution of the United States of America-was the *Sahifah al Madinah*, written by the founder of Islam in the 7th century, to regulate relations between the new Muslim community, Quraish tribe and Jews of Arabia.

This would therefore suggest that the latter-day despotism that has come to characterize almost the entire Muslim world today is not something that is inherent in Islam. It merely represents a very long period of the abuse of power by Muslim rulers that has today crystallized and become such as an unfortunate reality.

Even a cursory look will reveal that there is much that is common between Islam and democracy.

In Islam, governance is supposed to be conducted by *shura*, the principle of consultation; and it must always be done according to the dictates of *ijma'*, a process of consensus-building unique to Islam.

Whether this consultation takes the form of a referendum or an election for the choice of the leadership or in deciding the broad foundations of

statehood or national identity; or it is carried out on behalf of the people by an elected consultative assembly, the fact is that both Islam and democracy demand that there should be consultation and consensus-building.

The highest and most inclusive and periodic instance of this consultation in Islam is the holding of election, in which, as it were/ everyone qualified is given the chance to be consulted, Whether in democracy or in Islam, election is the bedrock for the democratic process and for it to reflect the popular will, it must be free, fair, definitive and inclusive.

Indeed, even the principle of opposition is provided for in the corpus of Islam. The founder of Islam was reported to have declared that the highest instance of the protection of public good is the word of truth spoken in the presence of a tyrant.

Besides the disapproval of tyranny, this declaration points not only to the legitimacy of opposition but to its necessity. This same principle is at work in the demand by Islam for accountability for all those who hold public office. The actions of the leadership must be open to public scrutiny and censure.

And it has been said that the freedoms enjoyed in the free world were there in Islam long before democracy discovered them. There is the freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of religion, and the freedom of conscience. In Islam too these freedoms have, before the onset of arbitrariness and tyranny, always been enjoyed.

The freedom of expression in Islam, which is, among other things restricted only by the laws of blasphemy, is the same as the freedom of expression in a democracy that is restricted by the laws of libel. In fact in some democracies such as Britain, this freedom is restricted by both the law of libel as well as by the law of blasphemy.

Contrary to popular perception, the freedom of religion in Islam's absolute. The Qur'an unequivocally commanded that there is no compulsion in religion; one becomes Muslim only out of one's free will. But once Muslim, he is bound by the provision of Islam in a way not unlike the manner in which a democrat is bound by the provisions, the demands and laws of democratic culture.

The goal of Islam has always been to promote individual liberty but without

endangering the equality between individuals in society, It is also the duty of the state in Islam to protect the individual in the enjoyment of his many rights, but without causing" the larger society any harm.

In all this, we find no grounds for incompatibility between democracy and Islam. Indeed, properly understood democracy is a partner, not a threat, to Islam. And if practiced according to the rules, it enables Muslim communities to create better societies, and allow the people to exercise greater control over their lives.

Problem only arises when democracy aligns itself to secularism, because it then becomes difficult for it to be acceptable to most Muslims or, indeed, to almost all religious people. But personally, I do not regard such an alignment between democracy and secularism necessary or inevitable or even in the long term interest of democracy.

Therefore instead of wasting time debating about this incompatibility, Muslim communities should seize the opportunity presented by the current wave of democratization to fully democratize their societies and use their new-found power to check the abuse and excesses of their leaders.

Talking of democracy sadly reminds me of the grim reality of its practice in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Let me say at the outset that it is difficult for those not normally resident in Nigeria and not conversant with what goes on behind the scene to truly appreciate the full grimness of the situation in the country today. Most informed watchers of the current Nigerian scene, and in this case even including Paden, have been able to scratch only the tip. The rest of the iceberg lies invisible below.

The reality is that democracy has been raped in Nigeria and is being destroyed. It is being systematically sacrificed in its name by the very class that is supposed to be its protector.

Since the election of 2003, the government has bared its fangs and made mince meat of all of the remaining vestiges of democracy. It has, for instance, made nonsense the concept of the separation of powers. Through corruption which it claims to be fighting; and through the use of blackmail, to which it never admits, it has eroded the powers and compromised the independence of the legislature. Today the national legislative house finds it difficult to

debate or take a position contrary to that of the Executive branch.

It's a pity but it is true that this nature of control only becomes possible through the use of blackmail to which the state administrators have made themselves open. Through the corruptive exercise of this type of control, the Nigerian government, against all of the objection of the majority of the people of the country, is trying to push through an illegal constitutional amendment to give itself a third term in office.

The Nigerian constitution, like the constitution of the United States stipulates a maximum of two terms for the President of the Republic. President Olusegun Obasanjo is finishing his second term in 2007, but he wants another.

For the past two years it was this struggle to make such a third term possible that has occupied all the time of the president. This was the hidden agenda that the whole nation cried out and kicked against when the National, Political Reform Conference was set up.

At that time, the existence of an agenda for this unconstitutional third term in office for the president was vehemently denied, Today, it has all come out; and it is on its way to being realized,

Needless to add, this must be seen as a prelude to the life presidency, nowadays all too common in Africa. Even though Professor Paden has expressed some of these concerns it is worth repeating that the US administration should not close its eyes to the excesses committed by undemocratic, indeed antidemocratic, governments just in order to secure or retain their support in the war on terrorism-or for any reason for that matter. Neither is it Tanzania, Kenya or Nigeria.

But democracy is not the only thing in trouble in Nigeria today. Since 1999, when the government first came into office, life had generally become difficult; and as inflation and unemployment took their toll, standards of living has become lower than at any time in recent memory.

Meanwhile, on the international corruption index, Nigeria is rated the sixth most corrupt country in the world. This, of course, is in spite of all that the government said it has done to fight corruption.

50 pervasive is corruption in Nigeria today that it has been identified by all people within and outside the country as the most important factor that has kept Nigeria down and rendered it unable to a role model for other nations within its regions. But image is not just an external problem.

Internally, the recent reintroduction of Shari'ah has been identified as one of the factors that have robbed Nigerian society of its cohesion. But as Professor Paden observed, the reintroduction came at a time it did partly due to a breakdown in the law and order situation, against the backdrop of a failed political leadership.

This, of course, is to underscore, and not to excuse, the fact that many of those who promoted the idea of the Shari'ah did have political motives for doing so. As events unfolded it became evident also that there were not qualified to undertake the task.

And, consequently, largely because of the superficiality of their own understanding of its provisions and their gross ignorance of its spirit} they almost succeeded in giving Shari'ah a bad name.

In the end, it was only the painstaking conflict resolution efforts undertaken by the cadres in our political party structures, and the intervention of the elders of our communities that helped resolve the tension created; but unfortunately, not without unnecessary loss of lives.

I believe now that both the Muslim community and the Christian community in Nigeria-with much regret on both sides-are much wiser and perhaps better for it; because[hopefully] the Shari'ah issue can never be exploited again - or be unnecessarily opposed by anyone.

The point-and I think it has been made at such a costly price-is to reaffirm the recognition of the rights of the Muslim community to the Shari'ah and at the same time, guarantee that non-Muslims should never have to be adversely affected by it or by its implementation.

But while it lasted the Shari'ah crisis, spawned the most extensive, and hopefully most sincere interfaith dialogue ever seen in the country. It was a difficult moment for Nigeria; and like all difficult times, it produced the best in some Nigerians.

And while it is still going through painful problems this may still be the right time for the US to engage Nigeria as a partner for the search for peace in Africa, in the Muslim world and in the world at large.

'Without doubt, Nigeria's problems are many, and may be deep-seated; but they are not insurmountable. With the right leadership, the support of the people and the understanding of the international community, troublemakers on both sides of the ethno-religious divide who profit from the planned chaos can be easily taken care of; and the Nigerian state be led to realize its destiny.

Only then would it rise to become that core state on the African continent, or the Muslim world that Professor Samuel Huntington said it could be. Thereafter it could be the model and the example to copy for all those engaged in conflict resolution, success in which is a necessary condition to attain peaceful coexistence and rapid development.

Today, Paden is synonymous with historical and sociological scholarship on Nigeria and I know of many people in Nigeria's north who would swear by his name. Many of them have said they only began to properly understand the dynamics of their own society after reading his ***Religion and Political Culture in Kano***.

The same expertise has been brought to bear on this new book on the civic cultures of the emirate states. And throughout its pages Paden is optimistic about the future.

With the increasing acceptance of the principles and practice of democracy by Nigerians Muslim communities-the empire building emirate states of the north, the Kanuri of the northeast and the non-state Yoruba of the southwest and the minorities of the Middle Belt the scope for creating institutions for conflict resolution that are sensitive to Muslim sentiments will hopefully widen. This will significantly add to the already existing wealth of experience available in Nigeria; and to that same extent add value to Nigeria's usefulness as a partner in international conflict resolution effort.

In conclusion, I have no better way to end my talk than by paraphrasing Paden's own conclusion. We are really here to agree with his major theses in the book, and say 'Thank you.'

As the experience of Nigeria shows, democratic federalism is an effective means of avoiding state failure and of addressing the threats of terrorism with great effectiveness. If the international community is really serious about the success of conflict resolution worldwide, its highest priority is to promote and support the emergence of workable democratic federalism in Nigeria today.

If this is done, the implications of its success in Nigeria for other parts of the Muslim world are going to be enormous and the effect very profound. This is because, if civic cultures can reinforce approaches to conflict mediation and resolution, then, in the end, it is such other priorities as economic development and free exchange of ideas, rather than violence and mindless destruction that will result. And that should be the goal of all people of goodwill.

Clearly, therefore, it is the duty of the international community, notably the US, to help strengthen all of the relevant organizations and tendencies engaged in conflict resolution effort in Nigeria and elsewhere, because, as Paden said, a globalizing world requires that we build bridges, not walls.

Thank you very much for your patience.

General Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR