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In Nigeria's North, a Compromise Between Islamic Law, Secular Culture

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KANO, Nigeria -- The new, lemon-yellow motorized rickshaws for women bear the slogan "Be Pious," and their presence on the streets of Kano says something about the religious and political struggles of Nigeria.

The vehicles are an attempt to mesh Islamic law with the economic reality in this northern city. They appeared by the hundreds a few months ago, after women were banned from riding on motorcycle taxis -- which forced them to press against male drivers.

It's a situation that, at its heart, developed over years.

Nigeria is officially secular, with its 140 million people nearly evenly divided between Christians and Muslims. Christians predominate in the coastal south and Muslims in the north.

In 1999, more than a decade of brutal military rule ended with President Olusegun Obasanjo's election, and many in the north began clamoring for Islamic law. In many ways, it was a reaction to general lawlessness and Nigeria's shattered justice system.

Northern politicians seized on the issue as a reliable vote-getter. As civilian rule and the new millennium dawned, 12 states across the north declared that they would follow sharia, the Islamic civil and criminal code.

But several factors have prevented Islam from becoming completely dominant.

When sharia was first declared, riots flared. Christian and Muslim youths did battle in Kano and other cities, leaving hundreds dead.

Obasanjo, a southerner and a Christian, and others in the federal government declared their opposition to sharia and said they would work to ensure that its implementation wouldn't run afoul of the federation, which gives wide powers to the states. When sharia has clashed with national law, the federal government has won.

Obasanjo is barred by term limits from running in the April 21 presidential election, in which Muslims are the three main candidates. Even if the next president is Muslim, Nigerians say, constitutional checks make it impossible to strengthen sharia much more, or to extend it across the country.

Islamic fervor is stronger in northern Nigeria than in many other parts of Muslim West Africa, and Osama bin Laden has targeted the country for "liberation." But signs of the most stringent interpretations of Islam are rare.

Unlike in some countries in the Middle East, women drive cars and vote. They have unfettered access to state education, although female literacy lags that of males. Women run for elected office, albeit rarely.

Only two amputations -- the punishment for theft -- ordered by a sharia judge are known to have taken place, and there have been no executions.

Despite a statewide ban on the sale of alcohol, beer and whiskey are openly sold in the north's Christian enclaves, and the occasional man in Muslim gown and cap can be seen tipping back a green bottle of Star beer.

Many Muslim women cover their hair, but few adopt body-shrouding veils.

Nigerians say the strictest interpretation of sharia runs counter to their culture. Keeping women behind doors and out of sight, or cloaking them in fabric, is a foreign idea in Nigeria, where women play leading roles in economic life.

"That can be practiced in Saudi, but not here," said Haruna Bakar, a 29-year-old male mill worker. "The religion came from Saudi, but when it came here, it met our culture."

Sharia has also met Nigeria's poverty, which is among the worst in the world despite billions of dollars in government revenue generated by the country's oil industry, the biggest in Africa.

A fact of life in Nigeria is that all able hands are put to use, male or female, at whatever jobs can be found.



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For Aisha Ahmed Hassan, the head of the country's Muslim Sisters' Association, strict sharia would be the natural state of being if not for poverty. She supported the 2005 ban on women riding motorcycle taxis but says women chose the motorbikes because that's all they could afford, not out of impiety.

"For me, what's un-Islamic is the situation that made them do that. Their knees and legs are out, but they were just doing it because they have no other option," she said. "It's not ladylike."

The state government agreed that women buzzing through streets clutching a man to whom they were not related was not in keeping with Islam and ruled that women could no longer ride the hazardous motorcycles, known in Nigeria as Okadas -- named after a defunct Nigerian airline in a country known for air crashes.

But without motorcycles, women suddenly found themselves immobile in a city of tiny back streets and sprawling markets that cars can't negotiate. Women, who make up 60 percent of commuters in Kano, protested, saying that they needed to go to work and the market and that the government had to find a solution.

Entirely rescinding the order would have angered Muslim leaders, so officials found a solution in the tricycle rickshaws, essentially motorcycles with two back wheels and a canopied seating area with room for three passengers.

Women sit behind the male drivers, with black plastic curtains that hide them from the traffic.

Initially, 500 of the rickshaws were imported from India. The government is planning to send 1,000 more rickshaws into the streets and keep up driver subsidies that artificially make the rickshaws cheaper than motorcycles.

A ride inside Kano is fixed at the equivalent of 30 U.S. cents -- at least a quarter less costly than the Okadas. Cabs are much more expensive.

Many women have taken to the rickshaws, although some still ride the motorcycles -- shooting past government-sponsored billboards calling on citizens to "fear God" and "be kind."

Some feel oppressed by the official interference in their lives.

Tawkaltu Yakub, a 28-year-old market seller, has traveled to Nigeria's unruly main city, Lagos, in the Christian south, where she saw how the other half lives.

"In Lagos, we're free," she said. "No restrictions there."

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