

# Nigeria Turns From Harsher Side of Islamic Law

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Candace Feit for The New York Times

Girls in Kano, Nigeria, attend a hybrid school that combines Islamic education with secular subjects like math and reading.

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By LYDIA POLGREEN  
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**KANO, Nigeria** — Just last year, the morality police roamed these streets in dusky blue uniforms and black berets, brandishing cudgels at prayer shirkers and dragging fornicators into Islamic courts to face sentences like death by public stoning.

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Candace Feit for The New York Times

A woman in Kano rides a motorcycle taxi, which was illegal under the brand of Islamic law that held sway here until

But these days, the fearsome police officers, known as the Hisbah, are little more than glorified crossing guards.

They have largely been confined to their barracks and assigned anodyne tasks like directing traffic and helping fans to their seats at soccer games.

The Islamic revolution that seemed so destined to transform northern Nigeria in recent years appears to have come and gone — or at least gone in a direction few here would have expected.

When Muslim-dominated states like Kano adopted Islamic law after the fall of military rule in 1999, radical clerics from the Arabian peninsula arrived in droves to preach a draconian brand of fundamentalism, and newly empowered religious judges handed down tough punishments like amputation for theft. Kano became a center of anti-American sentiment in one of the most reliably pro-American countries in Africa.

But since then, much of the furor has died down, and the practice of Islamic law, or Shariah, which had gone on for centuries in the private sphere before becoming enshrined in public law, has settled into a distinctively Nigerian

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compromise between the dictates of faith and the chaotic realities of modern life in an impoverished, developing nation.

“Shariah needs to be practical,” said Bala Abdullahi, a civil servant here. “We are a developing country, so there is a kind of moderation between the ideas of the West and traditional Islamic values. We try to weigh it so there is no contradiction.”

The federal government cracked down on the Hisbah last year, enforcing a national ban on religious and ethnic militias, and the secular, federally controlled police force has little interest in enforcing the harshest strictures of

Shariah. Violence between Muslims and Christians has also begun to subside in the north.

But even before then, the feared mutilations and death sentences almost never materialized. Public floggings are quite common, and in Zamfara, the first state to adopt Shariah as the basis of its criminal code, at least one man had his hand amputated in 2000 for stealing a cow, but other sentences of mutilation have rarely been carried out.

And despite several internationally known adultery sentences of death by stoning in a public square — including that of Amina Lawal, a woman from Katsina State who gave birth to a child out of wedlock that a Shariah court in 2002 took as evidence of the crime — not one stoning sentence has been carried out. Ms. Lawal’s conviction was overturned the following year, and she is now active in local politics, living freely with her daughter Wasila in her hometown.

The change has little to do with religious attitudes — northern Nigeria remains one of the most pious Muslim regions in Africa, as it has been since the camel caravans across the Sahara first brought Islam here centuries ago. In Kano, the main city of Kano State, thousands of men spill out in neat rows onto the city’s main boulevards on Friday afternoon, an overflow of devotion for the week’s most important prayer, and virtually all Muslim women are veiled.

The shift reflects the fact that religious law did not transform society. Indeed, some of the most ardent Shariah-promoting politicians now find themselves under investigation for embezzling millions of dollars. Many early proponents of Shariah feel duped by politicians who rode its popular wave but failed to live by its tenets, enriching themselves and neglecting to improve the lives of ordinary people.

“Politicians started seeing Shariah as a gateway to political power,” said Abba Adam Koki, a conservative cleric here who has criticized the local government’s application of Shariah. “But they were insincere. We have been disappointed and never got what we had hoped.”

Facing backlash from citizens and criticism from human rights groups at home and abroad, state governments that had swiftly enacted Shariah and embraced its harshest tenets are now shifting the emphasis from the punishments and prohibitions to a softer approach that emphasizes other tenets of Muslim law, like charity, women’s rights and the duty of Muslims to keep their environment clean.

“Shariah is not only about the cutting off of wrists,” said Muzammil Sani Hanga, a member of Kano State’s Shariah Commission and a legal expert who helped draft the state’s Islamic code. “It is a complete way of life.”

New programs have sprung up to encourage parents to send their daughters to hybrid public elementary schools that offer traditional Islamic education along with math and reading, in keeping with Islamic principles that call for the education of girls. In many of these classrooms, girls outnumber boys, and the United States Agency for International Development is so impressed with the potential of these programs that one third of the schools it supports across Nigeria are integrated Islamic and secular, according to officials

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State officials are using Islamic exhortations on cleanliness to encourage recycling of the plastic bags that choke landfills and gutters. One governor, citing the Islamic duty to care for the indigent, recently instituted a monthly stipend for disabled beggars.

“Our approach is a humane Shariah, not a punitive Shariah,” said Bala A. Muhammad, director of a state program in Kano called A Daidaita Sahu. The name, a Hausa commandment, means “straighten your rows,” a reference to the razor-sharp lines formed by Muslims as they line up to pray and a metaphor for the orderliness required in everyday life by the Koran.

Hundreds of yellow motorized rickshaws purchased by the state government make it easier for women, who had been barred from taking motorcycle taxis, to get around.

“As a Muslim woman I want to be modest,” said one commuter, Amina Abubakar, as she stepped daintily into the back seat of a rickshaw and pulled its privacy curtain closed. “This is more comfortable, and the safety is better.”

To be sure, conservative elements hold sway in some areas. In October, a Shariah court in Kaduna upheld the ban of a satirical play by the human rights activist Shehu Sani about a corrupt politician who uses Shariah to manipulate his constituents.

But the shift may also be helping to ease tensions between Muslims and Christians in a country where sectarian conflicts, often stoked by politicians to stir up support, have killed thousands over the past decade.

“The thing has caused a lot of harm,” said the Rev. Foster O. Ekeleme, a Methodist bishop in Kano who leads a flock of mostly Ibo tribespeople from southeastern Nigeria. “There was burning of Christian churches. Christians were killed. So many people were displaced. But now, the tempo is cooling down.”

Mr. Ekeleme had just been visited by a senior adviser of the Kano State governor, an Ibo Catholic, Chris Azuka, who was appointed to try to improve interfaith relations in the state.

“The idea of Shariah is to promote social justice, not create religious conflict,” Mr. Azuka said. “Shariah is not about violence.”

Northern Muslims and southern Christians have long coexisted uneasily across what is now modern Nigeria. Two centuries ago, the Hausa rulers of the north waged a jihad to convert southerners to Islam, and while they only reached the middle of the country, the aftershocks of the period can be felt to this day.

More recently, the Hausa elite have dominated the military, while southern Christians, like the Yoruba and the Ibo, have dominated commercial and intellectual life. According to international human rights organizations, 11,000 to 15,000 people have been killed in sectarian and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria since the return of democracy in 1999.

In Jigawa State, religious violence exploded in September 2006, amid political tensions before elections in 2007. A Muslim woman claimed that a Christian one had insulted the Prophet Muhammad, and mobs of Muslim youths descended on Christian churches in the state capital, Dutse, burning several to the ground.

The mob arrived at the Assemblies of God church, where the pastor’s wife, Nadi Dangana, said she barely escaped over the wall before the youths broke down the gate.

“We escaped with our lives, but all our property is gone,” she said.

The church was left in ashes, its altar and crosses charred stumps. A makeshift sanctuary without walls stands in its place. Blackened bits of salvaged corrugated roofing keep out the rain.

But these days tensions have cooled, said Garba Shehu, a former Muslim from Dutse who converted to evangelical Christianity. When the governor signed the law creating a stipend for beggars, he invited three Christian clergy members to pray alongside three Muslim clerics.

"We thank God we don't see the same tensions as before," Mr. Shehu said. "We are free to practice our faith without fear."

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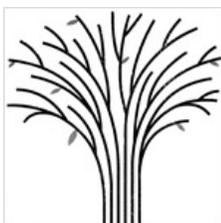


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