

Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective

Volume 4

Number 2 *Alliance of Civilizations: Turkey at the Crossroads*

Article 11

June 2010

Book Review: Faith and Politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World

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Recommended Citation

Adesina, Oluwakemi Abiodun (2010) "Book Review: Faith and Politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World," *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol4/iss2/11>

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Book Review

John N. Paden. (2008). *Faith and Politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press. xii + 140 pages. ISBN 978-1-601270-29-0

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A confluence of local and global events beginning from the late 1980s has contributed to the rise in influence of the global jihadists. Several groups have turned local discontent into a global call for action, thereby, in several cases, effectively linking national and international insurgent objectives. It is within this context that this book should be understood. Nigeria becomes a subject of this study in its position not only as the “least known of the Muslim world’s pivotal states” but also in its “role as the dominant African state, its extraordinary influence in West Africa, its significance as a major world oil producer, and its experience with democratic rule since 1999, which makes it “a critical country, especially in its relations with the United States” (pp.3-4). The book explores the pathways to understanding the politics and religious aspects of this country within the context of international security and economic development. In its six chapters, this volume draws on the over four decades of living and teaching experience of John Paden in Nigeria to articulate and offer a brilliant interpretation of Nigerian realities. Paden particularly sets out to answer the question; “Does Nigeria’s influence and significance extend beyond its immediate regional environment?” He also poses the mind boggling question of Nigeria’s continuing existence as a single and united entity with its “ethno linguistic and religious diversity.”

Paden leaves no doubt as to the relevance of the demographics, urbanization, religion, ethnicity, education, agriculture, industry, oil, income distribution and the connotations of all these in a global world. It is against this backdrop that he investigates the import and possibly the influence of Nigeria as a “pivotal” state within the African, Muslim, and global framework. He explores the key roles of

Nigeria in Africa and the wider world, taking into consideration the interesting demographic component groups of the Nigerian State that is almost equally divided between Christians and Muslims. In this book, Paden illustrates that the approximate parity in religious demographics of the country has made it a pivotal state in global village particularly due to its large and increasing population. In the age of terrorism, this becomes very worrisome. In recent years, several parts of the Third World have been wracked by terrorism and political violence that are offshoots of the so-called "clash of civilizations." The rise of al-Qaeda has created threats from sub-state groups in the form of transnational terrorism. Several members of the group are convinced of the merit of their internationalist cause and are always ready to capitalize on the lessons learned from interactions with the global jihadist movement. The problem is no longer whether terrorists will strike but which nation is the next to move into the orbit of the internationalist jihad. The author worries about Nigeria in this regard.

The subsequent sections of the book draw attention not only to the importance of Nigeria but convincingly argue for the United States not to push Nigeria (and by extension, Nigerians) on the path of infamy. In particular, the author calls the attention of the United States of America (U.S.A.) to this seemingly unsuspecting "potentially disruptive extremist religious elements" (p.103) in its fight against global terror, urging the U.S. not to concentrate on the oil rich Niger Delta debacle alone.

These accounts are detailed, constructive, and informative, and are clearly presented and written in simple and fluid language. The excellent piece of work sticks very much to the relevance of Nigeria in a global context. Though an important contribution to knowledge, this work appears to be largely directed at the government and peoples of the United States of America, and possibly a useful guide for Nation building in Nigeria and other countries of the world with similar religious and ethno linguistic concerns.

This book, an indispensable volume in the ongoing discussions on Islam, global terrorism and Nigeria's internal problems, concludes with an advice to the U.S. government: "do no harm" (p.125) to Nigeria. However, the author's more stringent advice comes from the position that the U.S. should be more sensitive to local realities in the Nigerian State than is currently evident. One very striking recommendation of the author that stands out is this:

The United States needs to engage and normalize its relations with Nigeria at all levels. It must not be pulled into the trap of relying on political actors in Abuja (or in diaspora) to target those who may turn out to be opposition leaders. The basic requirements for engagement are clear. It should encourage

the professional language capabilities of those in the foreign service, especially Hausa, which is the lingua franca in the north; create opportunities for interaction of Americans and Nigerians (including Muslims) through improvements in the visa process; keep the needs of the oil industry in perspective with regard to overall relations; come to grips with the need for deeper understanding of Islam in West Africa, and especially Nigeria; and set an example of tolerance between people of the book—at home and abroad (p.126).

The book's solid empirical contribution, in a period consistently described as the age of global terrorism, guarantees it a continued relevance, most especially in the aftermath of the attempt by a young Nigerian Muslim man, Farouk Abdulmuttalab to blow up a Delta airline flight in Detroit, Michigan on December 25, 2009.