

Nigeria's Christian President Is Re-Elected in Contest With Muslim

Christians are divided in their support of Olusegun Obasanjo, who defeated Muhammadu Buhari at the polls in April

Few of today's world leaders begin their day in a prayer meeting. But since Olusegun Obasanjo was elected president of Nigeria in 1999, he has knelt on the floor of his parlor at 7 a.m. on most weekdays with a group of advisers to ask for God's guidance.

"Please pray for me today as I select my new cabinet," Obasanjo said at his morning chapel service on May 22, just a month after his re-election. Looking like a tribal chief in dark African garb, the politician asked for prayer after he stood and read aloud the entire chapter of 2 Chronicles 20.

"The battle is not yours but God's," Obasanjo, 66, said in a muffled tone as he read the story of Jehoshaphat's victory.

This weekday ritual has taken place for more than three years at Aso Rock, Nigeria's official presidential compound. What makes the president's faith remarkable is that he does not hide it from public view—in a nation where Muslims and Christians compete for dominance.

In Nigeria's capital, Abuja, a mosque dominates the skyline, and the shrill Muslim call to prayer is heard daily before sunrise. Yet in this seemingly hostile setting, Nigeria's Christian president surrounds himself with Baptist and Pentecostal aides and seeks counsel from pastors of the

nation's growing megachurches.

Obasanjo's sudden rise to power resembles a biblical drama. He was imprisoned by his predecessor, Sani Abacha, a corrupt Muslim who ruled Nigeria with an iron fist from 1993 until his sudden death in 1998. While Obasanjo was in prison, he read only the Scriptures and wrote five books, including *Sermons From Prison*.

"He drew closer to God. His faith was reinvigorated," said the president's personal chaplain, Y.A. Obaje, a Baptist seminary president whose office at Aso Rock is in a house that once was used as Abacha's residence.

"It is the first time we have had a king and a priest in one man," Obaje said of Obasanjo. "We have professors who say, 'If my president prays like this, I'd better get my life in order.'"

When he was elected to his first term, he immediately asked Obaje to build a Protestant chapel at the presidential villa. Today, Obasanjo attends services in the sanctuary every Sunday and hosts a monthly meeting for pastors there.

But in spite of these public religious displays, not all Nigerian Christians support their president—and some still view him as a military stooge. When he won his first term, prominent Pentecostal pastor Tunde Bakare prophesied that Obasanjo would die in office. After his re-election on April 19, another outspoken pastor, Chris Okotie, placed ads in Lagos' largest newspaper declaring that the president would suffer God's judgment.

And because the April election was tainted by widespread ballot fraud, some Christians claimed Obasanjo was just as corrupt as his Muslim opponent, Muhammadu Buhari—who tried unsuccessfully to stop Obasanjo's May 29 inauguration.

Moses Iloh, leader of the Eclectic Movement of Nigeria, told Lifeway magazine that Obasanjo's faith has not made a difference. "There is nothing there to show you that a Christian is in authority," Iloh said.

What irks many Christians is that Nigeria's worst problems have not been addressed since Obasanjo came to power. In fact, they contend that poverty and corruption have worsened. Once known as a rising economic power, Nigeria is now the 13th poorest nation in the world. The poverty level has skyrocketed from 27 percent in 1980 to 66 percent in 1996.

"We don't need a Bible-thumping preacher in government," said Lagos pastor Ladi Thompson, who added that Obasanjo failed during his first term by allowing states in northern Nigeria to adopt Islamic law, or Shariah. That has led to widespread persecution of Christians.

Other leaders in Lagos take a more tempered view. Saidu Dogo, an official with the Christian Association of Nigeria, told Charisma that Obasanjo is "just a baby in the Lord" whose recent conversion hasn't affected all his political views. Dogo expressed hopes that the president, during his second term, will take Shariah law to court so it can be proved unconstitutional.

Lagos pastor Tony Rapu, who prayed with the president at his residence in May, said he views Obasanjo as the first step in

a long process of national reformation.

“There is no question God has raised up this man,” Rapu said. “Having a Christian president is a powerful step. We might not all like his personal policies, but surely God has used this man like a Moses to bring us out of the bondage of military rule and dictatorship.”

And what happens after the first step? Rapu believes someone else will have to solve the problems of poverty, environmental degradation and corruption. “I don’t see Obasanjo taking us into the promised land,” Rapu said. “There is still much work to be done.”

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