

Students-Led Religious Activism in Nigeria: A Study of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit Port Harcourt

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ABSTRACT

The Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN), founded in 1954, has played a notable role in shaping Islamic identity among Nigerian youths. It has branches in every state called Area Unit. The Rivers State Area Unit - where Muslims constitute a minority— was established in 1984 by one Misbahudin Nurudin during his National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) posting. The organization has been active in various religious, educational, and advocacy initiatives. Although several research articles and reports have been published stating the condition of Muslims living in Nigeria, some have focused on role of The Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria MSSN as well, but The MSSN Rivers State Area Unit still remain unexamined. This study explores the historical evolution, organizational structure, and operational strategies of the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit. It asks: How has the MSSN responded to the challenges of religious minority status in Port Harcourt? What mechanisms has it employed to sustain Islamic consciousness and student activism in a context of limited institutional support? Adopting a historical-analytical method and drawing on oral interviews and primary documents, the research investigates the key turning points, leadership transitions, and institutional engagements that have defined the Unit's trajectory. It considers both internal and external factors—such as member instability, financial constraints, and religious tensions—and examines how these have shaped the society's programs and resilience. By focusing on the MSSN's localized experience in Port Harcourt, the study contributes to broader conversations on youth-led religious activism in pluralistic societies and the role of faith-based student organizations in shaping collective identity under marginal conditions. The key finding of the research is that MSSN plays a vital role in propagating Islam and uplifting Muslim community in Nigeria. This article recommends that the efficiency of the MSSN local units can increase by strengthening the organizational structure of the units, searching new financial avenues, building strong alumni networks and emphasizing educational and spiritual growth of the members.

Keywords: Muslim Students' Society, MSSN, Islamic Resurgence, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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Introduction:

The development of Islam in Nigeria has been attributed to so many factors ranging from socio-political and religious movements. The Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN) stands out as one of the organizations that have significantly contributed to preservation of Islamic identity, particularly among the Nigerian youth. This is akin to Allah's injunction that says:

﴿وَلْتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ﴾

“Let there arise out of you a group of people inviting to all that is good (Islam), enjoining Al-Ma`ruf (all that Islam orders) and forbidding Al-Munkar (all that Islam has forbidden). And it is they who are the successful.”¹

The Prophet also unequivocally stated that:

وَالَّذِي نَفْسِي بِيَدِهِ، لَتَأْمُرَنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ، وَلَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ، أَوْ لَيُوشِكَنَّ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَبْعَثَ عَلَيْكُمْ عِقَابًا مِنْ عِنْدِهِ، ثُمَّ لَتَدْعُنَّهُ فَلَا يُسْتَجِيبُ لَكُمْ

By He Whose Hand is my soul! You will enjoin righteousness and forbid evil, or Allah shall send down a punishment from Him to you. Then, you will supplicate to Him, but He will not accept your supplication.)²

This command accentuates the religious obligation of Muslims to engage in da'wah and societal reform. The challenges of marginalization, threats to religious expression and identity by the Christian missionary system of education confronted the Muslim students during the colonial rule. Hence, MSSN was formed in Lagos in 1954. Today the MSSN has grown in strength into a national organization in Nigeria, fostering a generation of Muslim youths who are both academically and spiritually inclined.

Few years after the national body was formed in Lagos, other state units were formed in Oyo, Ogun and spread across the geopolitical zone of the country. Thirty years after the founding of the national body, the Rivers State Area Unit of the MSSN was established in 1984 and it has been a critical force in the growth of Islam in in the state particularly among the youths. Through a range of initiatives and programs, MSSN Rivers State Area Unit has contributed to the spread of Islam to the larger community in addition to the educational institutions by ensuring that Islamic values continue to flourish despite several socio-religious and political challenges. It is on this basis that this article seeks to examine the historical development, operational systems, challenges, achievements and contributions of the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit to Islamic life in Port Harcourt. The National body of MSSN marks its 70th anniversary of its establishment while MSSN Rivers State Area Unit marks its 40th year of struggles. The research examines its emergence, activities, and the role it has played in spreading and strengthening Islamic consciousness among students. The study highlights the significance of MSSN as a youth movement and also as a platform for religious resurgence in a minority Muslim community. This paper reflects not only on its achievements but also offers a critical appraisal of its organizational structure, challenges, future prospects, and pathways for more impact.

1 The Qur'an, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *the Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (Brentwood, MD: Amana Publications, 2001), Vol: 3, P: 104.

2 *al-Shaybānī*, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūt, 6 vols. (Cairo: Mu'assasat Qurtubah, n.d.), ḥadīth no. 23349; Vol: 5, P: 338.

Research Methodology:

This study uses historical-analytical research design to investigate the foundation, developmental stages and the significant contributions of the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) in Rivers State. Using the historical approach, it enables us to do a chronological reconstruction of the growth of the organization and to shed light on its socio-religious environment that shaped its emergence and activities. Complementing this, the researcher uses analytical dimension to do a critical examination of leadership patterns, institutional strategies, and efforts aimed at nurturing Islamic consciousness among Muslim students and youths operating within a largely non-Muslim society.

Sources of Data:

The research uses a combination of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were conducted using personal oral interviews with who have been involved in MSSN in Rivers State activities from its inception. This includes the current and former executive members, and some Islamic scholars who are stakeholders in the state. Interviews were conducted in person and through direct communication channels. Additionally, to enrich the historical narrative and provide verifiable data to support the analysis of the organization's structure and impact, relevant documentary materials such as administrative records, internal memoranda, and official communiqués from key programs and events from MSSN Rivers State were adequately consulted. Secondary sources were consulted to complement the primary data which includes peer-reviewed academic works, archived newspaper reports, postgraduate theses, and studies addressing religious student movements in Nigeria and Islamic activism, and the lived experiences of Muslim minorities in southern Nigeria. Sources were carefully selected to ensure they reflect both the geographical and the central themes of the study.

Data Analysis:

The data were analysed thematically and chronologically. First, events were organized in a timeline to trace the emergence and institutional consolidation of MSSN in Rivers State. Thematic coding was then applied to identify recurring patterns and significant themes such as leadership transitions, activism in minority contexts, financial resilience, and inter-organizational collaboration. The analysis emphasized how these factors interact to shape the MSSN's trajectory. Triangulation of data from interviews, documents, and field observations ensured validity and reliability of findings. Contradictions and inconsistencies were critically examined rather than omitted, to reflect the complex realities facing religious student organizations.

Ethical Considerations:

This research was conducted in full compliance with ethical standards governing studies involving human participants. As the current Amir of the organization, the researcher obtained informed consent was from all interviewees prior to participation. They were clearly briefed on the purpose of the study, their role, and their rights—and they were equally given the option to remain anonymous if they so wished. Confidentiality was strictly maintained in addition, and no identifying information was disclosed without explicit permission. Also, special care was taken to represent the views and experiences of participants accurately, and to avoid any form of distortion or misinterpretation of events and the organization and the Muslim community at large in the state. Overall, the research process was guided by principles of integrity, respect, and responsibility towards all individuals involved.

Literature Review:

i. Islamic Revivalism and Youths Movements in Nigeria:

Scholarly research interest in Islamic development and revivalism in Nigeria has grown steadily, with special focus on the role of youth-based organizations in building and shaping religious consciousness and communal identity. Muslims constitute a minority in the South-South region of the country yet MSSN that is a youth-led Islamic movements has played huge role in propagation of Islam and Islamic cultural assertion. Kilani stated that several da'wah and Islamic activities in Southern Nigeria are largely carried out by different Islamic organizations like Al-USrah, and Nasfat, Muslim students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) and others. He posits also that the response to a perceived religious marginalization and exclusion within and outside formal educational system in Nigeria, such as the case of Rivers State University where the mosque was demolished by the state government, gave rise to the establishment of MSSN in the entire Southern part of Nigeria. Hence, MSSN stands to provide spiritual nourishment and also emerged a youth platform for sociopolitical mobilization.¹ To support this view, Majeobaje further mentions the importance of youth Islamic bodies in propagating and safeguarding Muslim identity in Nigeria and other Islamic communities. His points explained the multifaceted functions of youth-led Islamic movements globally ranging from education, social political, economic and leadership training to community advocacy most especially, where Muslims are in minority and facing all forms of marginalizations. Therefore, the Muslims must make efforts to navigate and change the narrative.²

The educational and community-based organizations have been noticed to be the current global tools to enhance da'wah and Islamic activities. This dual approach is central to the MSSN's mission of fostering both spiritual and intellectual development of our Muslim students.

ii. The Emergence of MSSN and Identity Formation:

Founded in 1954, the MSSN has been pivotal in shaping Islamic awareness among Nigerian students. Adebayo details how the society emerged at a time when Muslim students, particularly in southern Nigeria, faced systemic exclusion in Christian-dominated institutions.³ The MSSN provided a unifying platform for religious expression and communal support, evolving into a national body with considerable influence. The society's organizational structure—national, zonal, and state units—has enabled it to adapt to diverse regional contexts. In Rivers State, its function has extended beyond religious instruction to include advocacy and community building. In regions where Muslims are a demographic minority like Rivers Sate, organizations like MSSN play a vital role in preserving religious identity. Ryan and Deci argue that religious identity is foundational to youth self-determination, especially in pluralistic societies.⁴ The MSSN provides a sense of belonging that counteracts marginalization and affirms religious values. Kilani notes that in cities like Port Harcourt, where social institutions often reflect Christian hegemony, Muslim student

1 A. R. Kilani, *Minaret in the Delta: Islam in Port Harcourt and Its Environs*, Lagos: JJI Publishers. (2008), P: 1896–2007,

2 F. Majeobaje, *Youth Islamic Movements and Religious Identity in Nigeria* (Lagos: Darul-Hikmah Publishers, 2016))

3 K. Adebayo, *The Historical Evolution of MSSN in Nigeria* (Lagos: Islamic Publications, 2023).

4 Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist*, Vol: 55, Issue: 1 (2000), P: 68–78, https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanDeci_SDT.pdf (accessed March 12, 2025).

organizations serve as vital cultural anchors.¹ Suberu adds that such bodies often provide psychosocial support and a political voice for minority Muslim populations, particularly in education and public policy spheres.²

iii. Religious Advocacy, Challenges and Resistance:

The literature recognizes the advocacy role of student religious movements in confronting structural discrimination. The MSSN's challenges over the demolition of a mosque at Rivers State University illustrates this dimension. Gamson and Wolfs Feld argue that student-led movements often act as catalysts for legal change, using the courts and media to assert rights.³ Salamon similarly observes that coalition-building is essential in civil society efforts to challenge systemic exclusion.⁴ In the MSSN's case, collaboration with other Islamic groups has amplified its capacity to pursue justice and protect religious freedoms. Sustainability issues facing student organizations, especially those based on voluntary participation are well documented. Jackson, P. identifies how turnover erodes organizational memory and proposes technology-mediated knowledge-capture methods.⁵ Wiley's findings clearly show that financial insecurity and emotional stress among students directly contribute to disengagement, which in turn threatens major institutional objectives like retention, program continuity, and long-term projects.⁶ and to address these challenges, scholars have suggested, by way of recommendation, the strategies such as establishing a formidable mentoring, having a steady source of income, and social media and digital engagement. Nisar, N., A. Raza, P. N. Pathan, M. M. Sattar, and U. Memon, in their submission, emphasizes that alumni involvement helps institutions raise funds, access external resources, and manage operations during financial needs.⁷ In the same way Shulthoni et al. (2018) offer a comprehensive theoretical framework on leveraging waqf (endowment) for long-term financial sustainability in Islamic institutions.⁸ MSSN at all levels are affected and could adopt these insights where they have dwindling participations and financial challenge that historically posed obstacles.

Historical Background of MSSN:

The Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN) was established through the joint efforts of forty Muslim students at Methodist Boys' High School in Lagos State on April 18, 1954. The

1 A. R. Kilani, *Minaret in the Delta: Islam in Port Harcourt and Its Environs*, Lagos: JJI Publishers. (2008), P: 1896–2007.

2 Ibrahim Suberu, Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the Quest for the Unity of the Ummah (PhD diss., University of Port Harcourt, 2018)

3 William A. Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld, "Movements and Media as Interacting Systems," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol: 528, Issue: 1 (1993), P: 114–125, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716293528001009> (accessed February 12, 2025).

4 Lester M. Salamon, ed., *The State of Nonprofit America*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), <https://www.brookings.edu/books/the-state-of-nonprofit-america/> (accessed February 2, 2025).

5 Peter Jackson, "Capturing, Structuring and Maintaining Knowledge: A Social Software Approach," *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, Vol: 110, Issue: 6 (2010), P: 908–925, <https://doi.org/10.1108/02635571011054891> (accessed March 14, 2025).

6 Wiley, *State of the Student: Navigating the New Learning Environment* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2022), <https://newsroom.wiley.com/press-releases/press-release-details/2023/Student-Engagement-a-Growing-Problem-for-Colleges-Post-COVID-According-to-New-Wiley-Research/default.aspx> (accessed February 2, 2025)

7 N Nisar, A. Raza, P. N. Pathan, M. M. Sattar, and U. Memon, "Alumni Driven Sustainability Strategies: Paving a Way Forward for Sustainable Development of Public HEIs," *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-03-2024-0140> (accessed May 14, 2025).

8 Muhammad Shulthoni, Norma Md Saad, Saim Kayadibi, and Muhammad Irwan Ariffin, "Waqf Fundraising Management: A Proposal for a Sustainable Finance of the Waqf Institutions," *Journal of Islamic Monetary Economics and Finance*, Vol: 3, Special Issue (May 2018), P: 153–178, <https://doi.org/10.21098/jimf.v3i0.776> (accessed February 2, 2025).

idea of establishing it was conceived as a response to the socio-religious challenges faced by Muslim students in predominantly Christian missionary educational institutions. And since then, it has been recognized for building, promoting and preserving Islamic culture, values and identity in Nigeria among the youths since its inception. Championed by Tajudeen Aromasodu, the founding members struggle to create a single platform to combat the Christianisation, systemic indoctrination and derogatory attacks on Islam then prevalent in Nigerian's schools. This initiative was also made to address the inferiority complexes experienced by Muslim students, many of whom were coerced into changing religion to Christianity for them to gain access to missionary schools with sponsorship.

The maiden and historic meeting of MSSN that brought together representatives from seven secondary schools, including (now) notable figures such as Latif Adegbite, Shuaib Oloritun, and Saidat Anibaba among others, took place at Ansar-ud-Deen Primary School, Alakoro, Lagos. Latif Adegbite (late) was elected as the first president, while A. R. Shahid was appointed as the secretary to lay the foundation that would guide the society's early struggles to success. The primary objectives of MSSN according to its constitution is to foster unity among Nigerian Muslims, promote the study of the Qur'an and Arabic, establish an Islamic ummah guided by Shari'ah principles, safeguard Muslim interests, and to propagate Islam both nationally and internationally¹. By 1955, the MSSN activities had expanded far beyond Lagos. The Ibadan branch was formed by leaders such as Fatai Mabadeje and Muibi Adelanwo. Subsequent national conferences in Ijebu-Ode and Ilesa 1956-1957 further solidified the organization's presence across Northern and Southern Nigeria, driven by factors like steadfast adherence to the society's aims, internal unity, non-discriminatory membership policies, political neutrality, and the support of prominent Nigerian Muslim leaders².

Establishment of MSSN in Rivers State:

The MSSN's expansion into Rivers State occurred in 1984 when Misbahudin Nurudin, a member of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), founded the society at Baptist High School, Port Harcourt. In 1985/86 session when many Muslim corpors were posted to Rivers State, they also helped in their various places of primary assignment to establish the society. This establishment marked the beginning of MSSN's presence in higher educational institutions within the state, including Federal Government College, Rumuokoro, and Federal Government Girls College, Abuloma. By 1989, under the leadership of Mujahid Abubakr Goodhead (a Christian revert from Buguma), the Rivers State Area Unit was formally inaugurated in Port Harcourt, signalling the organization's structured growth within the region³.

In 1991, Mujahid Goodhead was removed as president because MSS activities have become a one-man affair; hence a dwindling fortune in MSSN activities. In April 1991, a caretaker committee headed by Mustapha Bello was inaugurated to pilot the affairs of society for six months. The mandate of the committee includes:

- I. To instill life into the society which had remained dormant due to the vacuum created by the removal of Goodhead.

1 MSSN *Constitution, MSSN Foundational Documents* (Lagos: MSSN National Headquarters, n.d.). Section 1, P: 2.

2 A. R. Kilani, *Minaret in the Delta: Islam in Port Harcourt and Its Environs*, Lagos: JJI Publishers. (2008), P: 1896-2007.

3 *ibid.*

- II. To strengthen the various branches so as to make for a good representation in the Area unit.
- III. To examine and, if possible, find urgent solutions to why the branches (under the unit) have not been functioning effectively; and
- IV. To look into the problems and difficulties of the various branches with a view to strengthening the tentacles of the society.

The six months caretaker committee tenure was able to organise weekly Usrah (study group) at 15/16 Victoria Street Mosque. The Usrah was organised for the younger Muslims in the primary schools and adult Muslims in secondary schools, higher institutions and working-class Muslims. The committee also inaugurated MSSN at Nigerian Airforce Secondary School, Rumuomasi and began visitation to Muslim inmates at Port Harcourt prison. The success of the MSSN during the period of the caretaker committee was partly due to the commitment of one Abdul Fatah Abdul Majeed, whose zeal and enthusiasm to make the Muslim youths understand Islam better was highly utilized by the committee most especially in the conduct of the Usrah. His aim was to bridge the gulf between the old and the young Muslims in Port Harcourt. Though a worker, he associated with MSSN activities and helped in organising MSSN members at Isaac Boro Park during the Muslim festivals.¹

The early years of the Rivers State Area Unit were marked by significant initiatives such as the first Qur'anic competition in 1990 and the establishment of extra-mural classes to support Muslim students' academic pursuits². These programs aimed to foster both spiritual and educational advancement among Muslim youths, thereby reinforcing their identity and academic performance.

Organizational Structure and Leadership Transitions:

The organizational structure of MSSN is hierarchical, comprising National, Zonal (A for Northern States and B for Southern States), Area Units (state-level), Area Councils, and Branches (higher institutions). MSSN Rivers State Area Unit initially encompassed the entire South-South region, including Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa-Ibom, Cross-Rives etc. Due to manpower limitations, the formation of Area Councils, such as the Port Harcourt Area Council led by Malam Yusuf, faced significant challenges and ultimately did not sustain³.

Leadership transitions within the Rivers State Area Unit have been pivotal in shaping its trajectory. Following the removal of Mujahid Goodhead in 1991 due to centralized leadership issues, which lead to a caretaker committee led by Mustapha Bello revitalized the society by organizing study groups (Usrah) and re-establishing branches in institutions. In 1992, the caretaker committee organized an election/selection during which Abdullah Igwe (d. 1995) emerged as president of the society. In 1993, Engr. Mukhtar Folarin and Abdul Lateef Hassan were appointed as president and secretary respectively. The Folarin executive organised inter-school Islamic Quiz competition between 1993 - 1994.

Since 1993, the Rivers State Unit members have been represented in MSSN zonal programs such as Islamic vacation courses (IVC). The Folarin tenure succeeded in raising the level of MSSN in the State to the admiration of National and Zonal executives of MSSN. The state hosted Nigerian Higher Institution Convention of Muslim Students (NIHCOMS) at

1 Ibid.

2 Y. Imam Malik, personal interview, August 23 and December 2024. Former Ameer of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit; current coordinator, MSSN State Qur'an Competition Committee

3 I. Ade, personal interview, August 25 and December 2024. Former Ameer of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit

University of Port Harcourt in 1992 and Zonal leadership training in November 1995. The activities of MSSN were boosted through the support of the patrons like: Engr. Ahmad Mansur, Alhaji Abdullah Alfa, Prof. A.T. Salau, Alhaji Ali Kwande and Col Momodu A. Sedenu (Rtd)¹.

After Muktar Folarin, Ibrahim Aselemi was appointed as the state Amir of the organization till 2003 when Isa Alabi took over. Imam Maalik Yahyah Tanko stated that After Amir Isa Alabi, the leadership of the Area Unit has seen a smooth succession of dedicated individuals, including, Mallam Muhammad Muzammil Musa (2009), Imam Maalik Yahyah Tanko (2012), Malam Ibrahim Ade (2015–2018), Malam Abdul Jelil Dhul-Qarnayn (2018–2021)², and the current Amir, Dr. Zubair Ibrahim. Each leader has contributed to the growth of the Area Unit by navigating the obvious complex socio-political religious landscape of Rivers State. Despite all these efforts, the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit still grappled with internal unavoidable challenges.

The MSSN Rivers State Area Unit has demonstrated remarkable exertions despite being faced with various social, financial, and institutional challenges. The current leadership was inaugurated in 2021 with which Dr. Ibrahim Zubair as the Ameer, has brought a renewed strategic focus to the organization. This is evidently shown not only in its consistent efforts of organizing socio-religious and educational programs, but also in securing scholarships for financially less advantaged member students and maintaining active collaboration with other sister Islamic organizations in the region. Currently, one of its priorities is in ensuring financial independence through income generating ventures and partnering with a Muslim brother.

Also, the organization has prioritized youth engagement for capacity building of its members by introducing trainings such as technology and online training sessions headed by Ustadh Abdul-Rafi' (Abu Rahmah), capacity building workshops (Taalibul Qudwah) by inviting resource persons from Saudi Arabia³, and the establishment of a dedicated MSSN social platform headed by brother Abdul-Lateef Adepoju of Rivers State University and sister Aishah Amedu of University of Port Harcourt. The social platform has facilitated institutional and inter school Islamic quizzes, football friendly matches, and social gatherings. All of these efforts serve to foster unity, solidarity and Islamic consciousness among Muslim students.

Since its inception in 1984 in River State, the organization has grown into a significant force within the broader Islamic movement. The current trends of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit stands as evidence to its resolved of nurturing Islamic identity and empowering Muslim youths. A looking at the history gives us a valuable understanding of the society's impacts and it also points to loopholes and the other strategies needed to ensure its continuity and sustainably for the betterment of the Ummah.

MSSN and Its Da'wah Activities in Rivers State:

Muslims constitute minority in Rivers State and often face various constraints as an organization. Despite that, the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN), Rivers State Area Unit, has recorded commendable achievements. It has been instrumental in da'wah struggles within Port Harcourt and its environs. With its activities, the Unit has significantly contributed to the Islamic awareness and enlightenment, educational support, and social

1 A. R. Kilani, *Minaret in the Delta: Islam in Port Harcourt and Its Environs*, (2008), P: 1896–2007.

2 A. J. Dhul-Qarnayn, personal interview, August 15, 2024. Former Ameer of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit

3 Abu Rahmah, Abdur-Rafi', personal interview, July 9, 2024. Teacher, Airforce Madrasah.

welfare of Muslim students. Hence, these successes reflect a high level of commitment to promoting Islam and its values, fostering unity among the ummah, and supporting the general development of Muslim students across higher institutions of learning and secondary schools in the state.

Religious and Educational Program:

The MSSN Rivers State Area Unit has organized a number of impactful religious education and spiritual developments programs. Annually, it hosts pre-Ramadan lectures where erudite scholars are invited. It also hosts state Annual Qur'anic competitions, and the biannual (April and December) Islamic Vacation Course (IVC), all of which serve as avenue for enhancing Qur'anic literacy and strengthening the consciousness of students. A unique and remarkable milestone was recorded in 2024 when the Unit, in collaboration with the Rivers State League of Imams and Islamic Scholars, facilitated the coming of the *Al-Qudwah* organization from Saudi Arabia for a three-day Nadwah (workshop) for MSSN members. The program was titled *Talibul Qudwah* (exemplary students). These initiatives have not only deepened the religious knowledge of participants but have also reinforced their sense of identity and belonging within the larger Muslim community in the state.¹

In addition to its local efforts, the Area Unit actively participates in regional and national MSSN programs. These include but not limited to the workshops, the National Higher Institutions Conference of Muslim Students (NHICOMS), the Conference of Muslim Students in Central Branches (COMSCEB), and the National Qur'anic Competition (Musabaqah). All these engagements provide broader and enabling platforms for exchange of ideas, da'wah, and inter-campus solidarity. The MSSN has also shown a strong commitment to student welfare through sponsorship, grants and facilitation of scholarships for economically disadvantaged students, enabling them to continue their education with little or no financial burden on them. This approach reflects the Society's mission to balance spiritual development with academic empowerment of their members.²

Coordinating Islamic Activities and Fostering Unity Among the Muslim Students:

The coordination of Islamic activities among the students across various institution of learning is notably, one of the major activities of the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit being the umbrella body Muslim Students. These institutions are among others: University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University (RSU), formally University of Science and Technology (UST), Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE), formally College of Education, Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Rivers State Polytechnic, all the secondary schools in the state where there are Muslim students. Social and religious events designed to bring together Muslim students from these institutions are organized by the Unit. These include inter-school Qur'an and quiz competitions among the students, inter-school football competition, and the annual MSSN Eid al-Fitr get-together/hangout. Significantly, participation in these activities has also extended beyond Rivers State to include Muslim students from Niger Delta University from Bayelsa, the University of Otuoke in Bayelsa State and Muslim corpsers Association of Nigeria (MCAN), River's state branch.³ These initiatives have played a huge role and success in fostering social cohesion, and a sense of togetherness, unity and

1 A. Abdullateef, personal interview, August 18, 2024. Secretary General of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit and current Student Ameer, Rivers State University.

2 I. Agboola, personal interview, July 20 and December 2024. Current PRO of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit.

3 M. Haleemah, personal interview, August 21, 2024. Former Ameerah of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit

brotherhood among Muslim students across the state.

MSSN and Its Advocacy and Engagement with Authorities:

In defending the rights and interests of Muslim students, the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit has been actively engaged in advocacy beyond its religious and educational efforts for the rights of Muslim Students. Particularly, the Unit is fully involved in the legal case surrounding the demolition of a mosque structure built by Muslim Students at Rivers State University (formerly, the University of Science and Technology) during the administration of Governor Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi in 2011. In response to the demolition, the MSSN, working in collaboration with other Islamic organizations, i.e. Al-Ussrah Inc., Rivers State Council for Islamic Affairs etc, to pursue the legal redress through the courts. Their efforts resulted in favorable judgments at both the trial and appellate courts. However, despite these legal victories, with the help of Lawyer Sanusi and his team, the Rivers State Government and the university authorities have continued to deny the Muslim community the permission to reconstruct the mosque on campus.

Repeated efforts have been made to settle the issue out of court as proposed by the government. The MSSN Area Unit in collaboration with the other Islamic organizations and individuals there have no significant effort by the government to action the proposition. Meetings with successive governors, Wike Nyesom, and Fubara S. have led to verbal assurances, yet no tangible outcomes have been realized for over fourteen years. This ongoing impasse shows the MSSN's critical role as an advocate for the religious rights of Muslim students. It also shows the broader challenges faced by minority religious groups in exercising their constitutional religious freedoms within a complex socio-political environment.¹

Challenges Faced by the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit:

From its inception, The MSSN Rivers State Area Unit has confronted with one challenge or the other that have threatened its existence, its operational capacity, and organizational stability. These challenges include but not limited to legal, institutional, and financial dimensions. Enduring with these challenges becomes inevitable in Daw'ah as the prophet is reported to hav said:

" الْمُسْلِمُ إِذَا كَانَ يُخَالِطُ النَّاسَ وَيَصْبِرُ عَلَى أَذَاهُمْ خَيْرٌ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِ الَّذِي لَا يُخَالِطُ النَّاسَ وَلَا يَصْبِرُ عَلَى أَذَاهُمْ".²

*"The Muslim who mixes with the people and he is patient with their harm is better than the Muslim who does not mix with the people and is not patient with their harm."*²

Indeed, the challenges require strategic adaptation and relentless efforts to navigate. Some of the challenges are discussed as follows:

1. Demolition of the RSU Mosque and Legal Battles:

The unresolved issue surrounding the demolition of the mosque at Rivers State University (RSU), is one of the most disturbing challenges faced by the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit. This has sparked unnecessary prolonged legal struggle without any blink of hope. The refusal

1 Prof. A. R. Kilani, personal interview, July 20 and November 2024. Professor of Islamic Studies, Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

2 Abū 'Īsā Muḥammad ibn 'Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, (Beirut, Dar al-Fikr li-al-Tiba'ah wa-al-Nashr), Vol: 4, P:73.

of the government to allow Muslims have a place of worship on campus is not only a violation of the religious rights of Muslim students but also a point to a deep-seated religious discrimination where the Christian students on the same campus have access to multiple churches and facilities, to mention but a few number of churches on campus: Chapel of Redemption, Catholic Church, Deeper life Church, Gateway International Church, Sabbath, Redeem Church, Salvation ministry, Anglican, CASOR, Seventh Day Adventist Church, Nigerian Federation of Evangelical Students etc.¹ Whereas the Muslim students in the institution remain without an official designated place of worship. The situation illustrates a disturbing imbalance in religious accommodations and institutional responsiveness.²

A similar scenario persists at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, also Port Harcourt Rivers state, where Muslim students have, under the leadership and effort sherif Agboola, Aishah Adepoju, Idris Agboola etc, for more than a decade, appealed for space to construct a mosque. Despite repeated efforts from the students and Area Unit, these appeals have been met with silence or resistance. As a result, Muslim students face significant barriers to fulfilling their religious obligations of congregational prayers and religious gatherings and commitments.³

2. Challenges of Manpower and Limitations:

One of the challenges of every organization in the state is the limited number of committed individuals Muslims available for da'wah. This is responsible also for the shortage of dedicated and active members and functional executive members of MSSN. This difficulty, no doubt, is largely tied to the relatively small Muslim population in the state.⁴ One of the critical consequences of this challenge has been the difficulty in establishing and sustaining an effective Area Council in the state. Area Council is one of the essential strata of MSSN structure. They are meant to operate at every local government council of the state. A deliberated efforts were made to establish the Port Harcourt Area Council during the tenure of Malam Ibrahim Ade (2015–2018) as the Ameer. However, the initiative was unsuccessful, majorly, (i) due to the small and scattered nature of the Muslim communities in the state (ii) the limited level of engagement of member students beyond their schooling period⁵ and (iii) the transient nature of the student population after school. As students graduate and leave the school environment, the organization often experiences abrupt gaps in leadership and institutional memory within the schools. This is an inevitable occurrence as students must graduate. Hence, the constant turnover affects continuity of ideas, making it so challenging to implement and sustain longterm programs and strategic initiatives. Therefore, the capacity of MSSN to continually function at its full potential remains constantly interjected and sometime restricted.⁶

3. Insecurity:

The security architecture in Nigeria generally and Rivers State particularly has posed a significant constraint on the operation of MSSN in the state. The political unrest, violence, kidnappings, and general instability in the state have, over the years, contributed largely to

1 A. Abdullateef, personal interview, August 18, 2024. Secretary General of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit and current Student Ameer, Rivers State University

2 Y. Imam Malik, personal interview, August 23 and December 2024. Former Ameer of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit; current coordinator, MSSN State Qur'an Competition Committee.

3 ibid

4 I. Agboola, personal interview, July 20 and December 2024. Current PRO of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit

5 I. Ade, personal interview, August 25 and December 2024. Former Ameer of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit

Y. Imam Malik, personal interview, August 23 and December 2024. Former Ameer of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit; current coordinator, MSSN State Qur'an Competition Committee

the setback MSSN is facing. Although, slightly different from the past, the security landscape has shown some improvement in recent times, nevertheless, the lingering perception of risk continues to affect the participation of secondary school students in programs. Most especially those requiring leaving their immediate environment. Many parents express unreserved hesitations and refusals to allow their children out of their immediate environment for any program. Consequently, the Area Unit sometimes experiences low attendance at key programs i.e. IVC, Da'wah weekend etc that are specifically meant for students. These limitations sometime forces MSSN to scale down organizing programs.

4. Lack of Financial Strength:

Sufficient funds is one of the major vehicles in running of in any successful program. Financial constraint is a persistent challenge for the MSSN generally and Rivers State Area Unit particularly. MSSN is a student-led organization and most of its executive members are either students or fresh graduate who do not have stable sources of income. This indeed is making internal fundraising efforts highly constrained. Consequently, the Unit often depends on external support in the form of donations from mosques, organizations and individual benefactors. However, such assistance is frequently not predictable and mostly insufficient to meet the full scope of the Unit's operational requirements and programmatic needs.¹ This irregularity in funding has had direct implications on the MSSN's ability to have a robust plan and execute more initiatives. Activities requiring financial commitments, such as organizing large-scale programmes, awarding scholarships to indigents students, or procuring and maintaining facilities, are often delayed, scaled down, or outrightly cancelled due to budgetary shortfalls. Hence, the lack of a steady financial base has hindered the Unit's capacity to invest in neither long nor short-term revenue-generating ventures, including the previously proposed idea of establishing business enterprises across its university chapters. As a result, financial instability continues to limit the MSSN's potential for sustainable growth and institutional vibrancy.²

5. Leadership Mobility and Instability:

Another major challenge confronting the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit is the transient nature of its members and particularly its leadership. Since the executive body is composed predominantly of students, changes in leadership are frequent and inevitable as members graduate or relocate for deployment for compulsory Nigerian Youth Service Corps (NYSC), employment and further studies. These frequent turnover and movement have led to gaps in continuity and weakened institutional stability and operations. A case for instance is the transition that occurred in 2018 when Mallam Ibrahim Ade, then Ameer of the Unit, left Port Harcourt for work-related reasons to Abuja. His departure necessitated the appointment of Abdul Jelil Dhul-Qarnayn as Acting Amir till the tenure ended. Similar was the Naibul Ameer (Administrative), brother Faruq Abubakar relocated to Lagos for work-related reasons in 2022. While such transitions are often managed with goodwill and dedication, they nonetheless interrupt the strategic flow of leadership and plans and hinder the execution of long-term initiatives. This is a great challenge in maintaining coherent policies efforts in executing giant programs are always cut short

6. Dwindling Interest of the Youths in Religious Activities:

There is a global gradual drop of interest and participation of the youths in both formal and

1 Maryam Idris, Interviewed, 02/07/2024. She is the current Ameerah of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit

2 I. Ade, personal interview, August 25 and December 2024. Former Ameer of MSSN Rivers State Area Unit

informal religious activities, and the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit has not been exempted from this global reality. According to Kilani¹ there is an observable and obvious decline in enthusiasm among the youths for participating in any religious program which have actually affected the vibrancy and effectiveness of the Unit's activities. This declining of interest frustrates the efforts of MSSN in promoting Islamic values and spiritual consciousness among Nigerian Muslim youths. The low level of participation and involvement is not only diminishing the quality and frequency of the programs organised by the Unit but also create difficulties in mobilizing volunteers. Most Nigerian youth give preference for social gatherings or other activities with financial benefits. This has posed an existential threat to MSSN and its relevance in higher institutions. If this is left unaddressed timely, it could result to weakening MSSN institutional presence and diminishing its influence across campuses in Rivers State.²

Recommendations for Future Direction

1. Leadership Training and Succession Planning:

It is essential for the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit and other Area Units to periodically organise leadership training for student members to ensure continuity and sustainability. One other way is the establishment of mentorship programs where the current or outgoing executives actively mentor, guide and train those who would succeed them. If properly done, this kind of mentoring would ease the disruption caused by frequent leadership and member relocation and student graduation. By formalizing the mentoring process, the MSSN can build a stronger, more stable and sustainable leadership pipeline that would preserve its vision and mission over time. In addition, the world is evolving and most organization have now upgraded to digital space to brae the barriers created by distance. MSSN should also braze-up their operation to the strategic use of digital platforms. Online meetings, training, webinars, discussion forums, digital seminars/workshops and collaboration digitally can also help bridge the gaps created by geographical dispersion and erase the fear of security concerns in the state. The executive should look for a way of having regular virtual engagements to sustain members involvement, even when physical gatherings are not feasible.

2. Enhancing Financial Sustainability:

MSSN is a non-profit making and non-governmental organization and yet needs funds to run its activities. To address financial challenges, it is recommended that MSSN Rivers State Area Unit explores means of having income generating ventures that are sustainable. This venture, if possible, to be managed by a dedicated team of alumni or well experienced members rather than the current students. This would reduce the risk associated with student managed operations. These ventures could include small-scale businesses depending on the financial capability or service-oriented business. Whatever profits realised should be channelled into the Unit's account to run its activities. In addition to that, the Area Unit can equally engage in regular crowdfunding campaigns and soliciting financial donations from successful Muslim alumni to enhance financial strength of the organization. Partnering with other Islamic organizations in River's state i.e. Al-Urah, Nasfat etc for sponsorships, and collaboration will ensure a consistent and reliable funding stream. Establishing an endowment fund can equally provide strong financial cushion for the MSSN. If endowment fund is established, it

1 Prof. A. R. Kilani, personal interview, July 20 and November 2024. Professor of Islamic Studies, Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

2 Ibid.

is a prudent strategy for ensuring the financial independence of student organizations.

3. Increasing Member Engagement and Participation:

MSSN Rivers State Area Unit should design more programs that resonate with the current interests of students while integrating Islamic principles is essential for increasing member engagement. To maintain student engagement, they must design programs that align with current students interests while integrating core values, such as Islamic principles. By combining Islamic teachings with professional development workshops, sports, or other extracurricular activities, MSSN activities would be appealing to a broader audience.

Active members should be encouraged to engage in peer-to-peer outreach, personally inviting and involving their peers in MSSN activities. Peer-to-peer outreach is a powerful tool for increasing participation in student organizations, as personal invitations are more likely to result in engagement. This personalized approach would counteract the declining interest in religious activities. River State Area Unit should design and implement a system to recognize and reward active participants to significantly boost participation. Recognition and reward systems¹ are effective in motivating students to participate actively in organizational activities, with awards and public acknowledgment serving as key incentives. This system would foster a culture of appreciation, leading to increased participation and retention.

4. Advocacy and Legal Action:

The MSSN should not relent in its legal pursuit regarding the RSU mosque issue. Continuous legal advocacy is vital for enforcing court rulings and protecting the rights of Muslim students in the school. This is crucial for enforcing court rulings and protecting the rights of marginalized Muslim Student, including religious minorities. Partnerships with zonal and national body of MSSN and other Islamic organizations and human rights groups can further amplify the effectiveness of these efforts. Also engaging in community awareness campaigns to highlight issues facing Muslim students, including the RSU mosque situation, is critical. Community awareness campaigns would be an essential tool for rallying public support and mounting pressure on authorities to address issues affecting minority groups²

5. Building Stronger Alumni Networks:

Establishing a well-organized MSSN Rivers State Area Unit Alumni Association would provide a promising avenue for ensuring the Unit's sustainability and growth. Given the transient nature of student leadership and membership, a strong alumni network can bridge the gap and provide continuity, strategic support, and vital resources that the current students may lack. Alumni would play a crucial role in overseeing and mentoring new members, offering informed guidance based on their lived experiences within the school and the organization.³ Additionally, they would be made to contribute financially, to support capacity-building, and open professional pathways for its student members. In particular, encouraging alumni to lead targeted projects would enable the Area Unit to benefit from their expertise and channel of networks while easing the operational burden on current students. By leveraging the strength of its past members, the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit can diversify

1 Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist*, Vol: 55, Issue: 1 (2000), P: 68–78, https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanDeci_SDT.pdf (accessed March 12, 2025).

2 William A. Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld, "Movements and Media as Interacting Systems," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol: 528, Issue: 1 (1993), P: 114–125, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716293528001009> , (accessed February 12, 2025).

its resource base and enhance program effective delivery.

6. Intensify more Efforts on Educational and Spiritual Growth:

MSSN should intensify more efforts on program that encourages both educational and spiritual excellence. The regular organization of spiritual retreats such as da'wah weekend, leadership training program to complement the biannual Islamic Vacation Course (IVC) should be intensified to serve as tools for nourishing spiritual life of the members. Such programs would provide enabling opportunity for participant to reflect, learn, and refresh outside their usual daily academic pressures. The programs would also, in addition, reinforce the Islamic values, build a stronger sense of unity and belonging among them.

Conclusion:

Over the past seven decades, the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) generally has been instrumental in shaping and nurturing the spiritual, intellectual, and moral life of Muslim students in Nigeria. MSSN is present at every state of the federation and it is called the Area Unit. Particularly, Where Muslims constitute a minority like Rivers State, the Area Unit has always been the hope of the ummah in protecting the Islamic culture and identity of the Muslim students and inculcating in them both spiritual and academic excellence. Established in 1984, the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit has been confronted with struggling and navigating both simple and complex situations such as financial constraints and fluctuating dedicated students, insecurity, marginalization, etc. Yet, strategic efforts have always been adopted in navigating those complex challenges to make the Area Unit remain not only relevant but also greatly impactful. The Unit has organised several spiritual and intellectual programs and it has served as a voice for advocacy and communal solidarity within the religiously diverse and sometimes tensed atmosphere among the youths. At the River State University, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education where the Muslim Students have been deprived of a place of worship, the Area Unit continues to struggle to secure to a place where the Muslim students would have equal opportunity to religious expression. As this study has obviously shown, the influence of the MSSN Rivers State Area Unit extends well beyond the spirituals, it also echoes within communities and impact in the aspirations of the young Muslims. MSSN continues to guide and guard for it remains the hope of the ummah.

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