

ROLE OF RELIGION IN NIGERIAN POLITICAL PRACTICES: A CASE STUDY OF 2023 GENERAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

Abalogu, Divine Maduka PhD
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State
dm.abalogu@unizik.edu.ng
+2348066672095

&

Godswill Okechukwu Nwokedi
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State
godswillnwokedi@gmail.com
+2347066291865

Abstract

Democracy is currently at the front burner of scholarly debate in Nigerian political and religious discourse. The effective practice and strict observance of the rules, values, principles and ethics of democracy has become a means of transforming societies to greater heights. Nigerian democracy has raised concerns and questions demanding answers as to why the country is still struggling with issues such as: justice, federal development and equal distribution of national resources. This research exposes carefully governance in Nigeria. This research reviews that democracy in Nigeria especially at the local government level has not done up to its expectation due to corruption partisan politics upper governmental interference among others. Again this research seeks to explain how religion can be used as a tool for effective democracy in Nigeria. Religion could influence a wide range of belief and social behaviours. It could affect the societal architecture, institutions and mechanisms through a multitude of economic, political and attitudinal variables. In particular, religion could affect the social preference for a democratic societal framework. Religion plays effective roles in the Nigeria electoral practices, such as; voters mobilization /sensitization, electoral monitoring and peace building, electoral violence mitigation, voter education and awareness and so many others. The methods of data collection in this research is both primary and secondary sources, such as previous works of foreign and local authors who have written on the relevant issues in journals, books of reading, internet documentaries and lecture notes. The primary sources include both participant and non-participant methods of observation.

Keywords: Religious, Evaluation, Nigerian, Democracy, General, Elections.

Introduction

Democracy has won for itself a household name across the length and breadth of most societies across the world today in which Nigeria is part of it. According to Joseph (2011), the concept of democracy is contained in the maxim of the American Declaration of Independence from British rule that all men are created equal and they are endowed with certain inalienable right by their creator. In Nigeria today, there is a danger in our democracy as the will of the people has always been manipulated in favour of few bourgeoisie class. This trend has obviously been characterized with the civil governance since 1999 to date. Most elections carried out in Nigeria have often been characterized with certain roadblocks. Violence has become a lingering feature of the elections and voters turnout as a result of the recycling of political candidates, ineffective Democracy in political parties and the failure of the government to deliver real progress. Conflicts have mounted roadblock to a strong democracy in Nigeria as there exist. Political / competition and communal ethnic religious rivalries pose a major threat to democracy.

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria the seventh consecutive general election in the country. This election is being described with allegations of vote-rigging and incompetence of electoral officials. Uzoanya (2023) records that the 2023 election also featured violence and ballots snatching. The 2023 General Election saw an increase in voter registration as many citizens working and determined to vote but also protects it.

In Nigeria today, religion has taken position in the country's politics. Many politicians make use of the power rooted in religion not only to achieve their aims, but also to subjugate their opponents and to legitimize their religion. Religion

played a role at the 2023 general elections; many people voted according to their faith, religious leaders charge their members to vote candidates who they endorsed. The problem which the study is concerned with is that democracy has failed to give good governance and the problems that have stunted the growth of Nigeria democratically. The research aims at examining challenges of the Nigeria democratic system in line with the just-concluded 2023 general elections in order to discourage the incidents that could pose a severe difficulty to nation-building. Again within Nigeria reference is made to general public and eligible voters in line with the 2023 general election.

Historical Antecedent of Democracy in Nigeria

The concept of democracy is inter dependent on the development of individuals. Democracy is more than a set of constitutional rules and procedures that determine how a government functions. Okoli (2022) states that in a democracy, government is only one element coexisting in a social fabric of many and varied institutions, political parties, organizations, and associations. Dewey (1942) states that, democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the common man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life. Capturing the classifications of democracy, Budge (2001), states that there are two types of democracy which are direct and representatives' democracy. Direct democracy is a type of democracy whereby citizens are continuously involved in the exercise of power and decision is by majority rule while in a representative democracy is a situation where representatives are elected by the people and entrusted to carry out the business of governance. Today the dominant form of democracy is representatives' democracy, where citizens elect government officials to govern on their behalf such as in a parliamentary or presidential democracy.

Nigeria, no doubt gained political independence from Britain, her former colonial master in 1960. This was however, short-lived as the military struck in 1966 suspending the country's constitution and in the stead introduced a number of military decrees which they executed with fiats. This was accompanied with denial of human rights, mismanagement of the newly acquired oil money at the time, corruption and widespread poverty. According to Barak (2006), if any democracy is not structured, it is for the purpose of prohibit the government from excluding the people from the legislative process or any branch of government from altering the separation of powers in its own favour. During the Fourth Republic, in May 29, 1999 there were rising expectations that the newborn democracy will deliver Nigeria from the long decades of savagery and oppression. A vast majority of Nigerians looked with great expectations of better things to come in the process of governance as they looked forward to the freeing of national commonwealth from the stranglehold of greedy public officials and to more effective and efficient programmes of social service delivery in areas of education, health, infrastructural development, poverty alleviation, disease control, unemployment, and insecurity.

Nigeria was granted independence on 1st October 1960 as Nnamdi Azikiwe was installed as the ceremonial president of the federation and Tafawa Balewa as the prime minister. A new constitution established a federal system with an elected prime minister and a ceremonial head of state. Alabi (2009) states that the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) headed by Azikiwe formed a coalition with Balewa's Northern People's Congress (NPC) after neither party won a majority in the 1959 elections. On October 1, 1963, Nigeria became a republic. Azikiwe became president of the country, although as prime minister Balewa was still more powerful. This stage gave birth to the military regime in Nigeria. The first military regime took place in 1965 and the last coup was in 1993 by Abacha who died in 1998. Olusegun Obasanjo again became head of state through the presidential election that was held in 1999, ending the junta and establishing the Fourth Nigerian Republic which is the current republican government of Nigeria. The fourth republic adopted the 1999 Constitution which enshrines the principles of the ballot and the franchise, and also provide periodic elections.

Evaluation of Party System in Nigeria

A party system is the political arrangement permitted by the law for political parties in a particular democratic state to operate. Bassi (2019) states that each society must have a political system in order to maintain recognize procedures for allocating valued resources. Bassi further states that party systems are divided into three broad categories: one-party, two-party, and multiparty. One-party system is a system in which a single political party has the right to form

the government, usually based on the existing constitution, or where only one party has the exclusive control over political power. A two party system is a system where only two parties or alliances, are placed either side of the center and they have a realistic chance of forming a majority. Multi-party system is a system in which multiple political parties have the capacity to gain control of government offices, separately or in coalition. Nigeria practices multiparty system, where several political parties compete for power and representation. The number of parties is usually not specific in multiparty system. Yagboyaju and Simbine (2019), state that multiparty system had a unique feature which is the possibility of independent candidature. Nigeria's politics witnessed four types of party system since independence in 1960.

Emerging Issues in the Contemporary Nigerian Electoral Practice

These emerging issues are the factors that tend to reduce or decrease effective Nigerian electoral practices and democracy. Progress has been made in the Nigerian electoral practice in recent years but there are still several issues that need to be addressed to ensure transparent, credible and free elections. Below, the researcher will discuss some emerging issues in the Nigerian electoral Practice. The emerging issues in the contemporary Nigerian electoral practices include;

God Fatherism and Bribery

Political Party primaries are elections that are done in a political party. Political parties in Nigeria have claimed to either run open or closed primaries. Party Primaries in Nigeria face several challenges that can impact their fairness, transparency and effectiveness. One of these challenges includes god-fatherism. Lonsdale (2002) shows that political god-fathers do not finance political office holders for altruistic purposes. He argues that, the thing they want is not the cleaner government or a more representative democracy, they want votes on specific pieces of legislation, which they, the special interest lobbyists, may even help to write, that will somehow advance their cause, which usually translates into "make the more money". In some cases, what they want is the absence of legislation. Money plays a significant role in Nigeria party primaries. Wealthy aspirants often have an advantage over others as they can provide financial incentives to party officials and delegates to secure their support. This undermines the principle of equal opportunity and frustrates aspiring candidates who do not have strong political connections or financial resources. Hamalai and Omotola (2017) state that party primaries and candidate selection are hardly allowed being true democratic, instead the moneybags usually hijack the process in favour of anointed candidate often at the expense of a popular candidate.

Electoral Violence

Electoral violence therefore is a form of anomic participation in the political process. According to Corsini (1999), violence as the manifestation of hostility and rage through physical force directed against persons or property. Elaigwu (2006) explains political violence arises mainly from the conduct of election with the intent of influencing the outcome of an election. Ladan (2006) explains the term electoral violence to be any act of violence perpetrated in the course of political activities, including pre, during and post-election periods, and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process, or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with the electoral processes.

Nigeria's electoral process had encountered several forms of violence ever since Nigeria gained its independence. Alabi (2009) explains that the challenges of electoral competition in Nigeria cannot be fully grasped without situating them in the context of the country's historical experiences. The 2023 general elections that took place in February and March respectively were not left out in this electoral violence. Biriowo (2023) reports that a Civil Society Organization, Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI), conducted an election violence monitoring and mitigation group report which shows that Nigeria recorded no fewer than 238 violence acts which resulted to deaths during the 2023 general elections. Olorokor (2023) reveals that United Nations (UN), gave a report that the presidential election held on February 25 have revealed the sharp ethnic, religious and demographic fault in the country.

Vote Buying and Electoral Fraud

Vote buying and electoral fraud are two significant issues that can undermine the integrity and fairness of elections. According to Callingert (2006), vote buying is a corrupt act which usually takes the form of a gift or gratuity bestowed for the purpose of influencing the action of the receiver especially with money or any other valuable consideration given or promised for the betrayal of a trust or the corrupt performance of an allotted duty, as to a fiduciary agent, a judge, legislator or other public officer, a witness, a voter. According to Sohner (1973), money has, in fact, been made

to become the mothers' milk of politics, which the political gladiators drink to remain in business. Suberu (2001) states that, the use of money to buy votes does not stop at election time. He further explains that it is a common practice in Nigeria. It is observed that the relative ease with which the elected officials show their gratitude by endorsing the legislative and policy proposals of campaign contributors seems to support the hypothesis that there is a correlation between special donations to political parties and candidates and legislative votes.

Weak Electoral Institutions

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is the body in charge of conducting elections in Nigeria. Nwobodo (2020) says that the actions of INEC staff reflect what happens in our general society. If the electoral body is free from corruption, he believes that the electoral process will also be free and fair. Ekunday (2015) asserts that the quality and credibility of elections are directly related to the competency of the organizing institution. The legal governing elections in Nigeria have been criticized for being insufficiently clear thereby leading to ambiguity and confusion in the electoral body. Inconsistent interpretation and application of electoral laws have created opportunities for manipulation and disputes. In the 2023 general elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission was accused to have failed in providing the essential infrastructure and logistical support to enable a free and fair voting exercise. INEC's inefficiency is highlighted by the delay of elections in some South East and South-South states and challenges with uploading results of elections captured by BVAS devices.

Roles of Religion in Nigerian Electoral Practice

Religion has long been a powerful force in shaping societies, influencing individuals' values, beliefs, and behaviors. Religion is a system of belief embracing all races and all belief. It is a road bringing everyone together in brotherhood. Nigeria is a country with a diverse religious landscape comprising of Christianity, Islam and Traditional African Religions which has witnessed the significant impact of religion on its political and electoral system. The 2023 general Elections present an opportune moment to evaluate the roles played by religion in Nigeria's democracy. The role of Religion in Nigerian electoral practices are witnessed in the following:

Voter Mobilization

Religion's role in voters' mobilization has a significant impact on political outcomes in Nigeria. Through moral and ethical guidance, the influence of religious leaders and institutions, and voter education, shapes how individuals engage with the political process. Religion is not the sole determinant of voter mobilization rather it serves as a powerful motivator for many individuals who seek to integrate their religious beliefs and values into their political choices. Hamalai and Omtola (2017) state that as societies continue to evolve, understanding the role of religion in voters' mobilization becomes essential for comprehending the broader dynamics of politics and democracy. Religion can mobilize voters through civic and leadership training. Both Christianity and Islam organizes civic training for skill acquisition for their members and in those programs, there is also leadership training where people are trained to participate in politics and also as civil observers who monitor elections. They may also conduct workshops and distribute voter guides, or host candidate forums to help voters make informed decisions based on their religious values.

Electoral Monitoring and Peace Building

Religion, as a belief system and a set of practices, typically does not have the formal role of monitoring elections. There are different ways religion can help in the monitoring of elections. Firstly, institutions help can advocate for ethical behavior among candidates, political parties, and voters. They can emphasize the importance of honesty, integrity, and fair play during elections. By encouraging their followers to adhere to these principles, religious organizations indirectly contribute to creating an environment conducive to free and fair elections. Religion can bring people from diverse backgrounds together through interfaith cooperation. In the context of election monitoring and peace building, religious leaders and organizations can collaborate with people from different faith to promote shared values of peace, justice, and respect for human dignity. By working together, they can pool resources, expertise, and networks to strengthen election monitoring efforts and foster peaceful environments during and after elections. Moreso, religion often promotes nonviolence, compassion, and tolerance. Religious leaders can actively advocate for these values during elections and contribute to peaceful and respectful discourse. They can discourage hate speech, inflammatory rhetoric, and divisive actions, fostering an atmosphere of understanding and cooperation. By emphasizing the principles of their respective faiths, religious leaders can inspire individuals to prioritize peaceful means of resolving conflicts and addressing grievances. In 2017, the Former governor of Anambra State, Mr. Peter

Obi confirmed that he has problems with his successor, Chief Willie Obiano. The Catholic Church took it upon them to settle the dispute between these two politicians.

Voter Education and Awareness

Political participation is fundamental human rights of man. Each person may take part in state affairs directly or indirectly. According to Lasswell (1958), religion and politics are two imperative parts of human society. Religion addresses and conditions man's spiritual balance, while politics shapes the act of religion. Human existence is impacted by religion as it has an extraordinary effect on each demonstration and attitude of a person particularly in developing a country. Religion has a great influence on Voter's education and awareness but it is also important to note that the extent of religious influence on voter education and awareness can vary widely. Elaigwe (2006), states that different religious traditions have diverse beliefs, practices, and levels of political engagement. Moreover, the degree to which individuals integrate their religious beliefs with their political decision-making can differ significantly among individuals. Ultimately, the impact of religion on voter education and awareness depends on the specific religious community.

Religious teachings often provide a moral and ethical framework that can shape individuals' political beliefs and actions. Diamond (1999) observes that religious leaders may address political issues from a moral standpoint, urging their followers to consider specific values or principles when making voting decisions. For example, a religious community might emphasize the importance of social justice, environmental stewardship, or human rights, which can influence how their members approach the voting process. Religious institutions may organize voter registration drives, provide information on the voting process, and encourage their members to participate in elections. Religious leaders and community organizers can use their platforms to promote voter awareness and emphasize the civic duty of voting.

Promotion of Good Governance and Accountability

Good governance and accountability are two qualities of a democratic leader. Diamond (1999), identifies four key elements of good governance: accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and the rule of law. Sarafa (2010) observes that the question of good or bad governance is ethical or moral. Mathew (2007) argues that good governance has much to do with the ethical grounding of good governance and must be evaluated with reference to specific norms and objectives as may be laid down. Religion can promote good governance and accountability in several ways. Religious institutions can provide a moral and ethical foundation for individuals and communities. It offers principles and values that emphasize honesty, integrity, justice, compassion, and fairness. When adhered to, these principles can guide individuals in positions of power and influence to make decisions that prioritize the common good and promote good governance. Religious teachings can emphasize the importance of accountability, both to God and to fellow human beings. Sarafa (2010) asserts that Religion often champions the values of justice and equality. It can encourage individuals and religious institutions to speak out against corruption, discrimination, and abuses of power. By promoting social justice and advocating for equal treatment under the law, religion can hold governments accountable and help ensure that governance is fair and just.

Many religious traditions emphasize the concept of servant leadership, which is a leadership style that prioritizes serving and meeting the needs of others rather than seeking personal gain or power. By promoting the idea of leaders as servants, religion encourages humility, selflessness, and a focus on the welfare of the people being governed. This perspective can contribute to good governance by fostering leaders who are accountable, responsive, and committed to the well-being of their constituents.

Conclusion

Religion plays significant roles in Nigerian electoral practices. The diverse religious landscape in Nigeria brings religion to the forefront of the political sphere. While religion can have positive influences, such as mobilizing voters, providing moral guidance, and advocating for social justice, there are also challenges and potential negative consequences. Religious leaders and institutions in Nigeria have the power to mobilize their followers, endorse candidates, and shape public opinion. Their involvement can foster civic engagement and contribute to the ethical conduct of politicians. Additionally, religious organizations often provide social services and engage in community development, making them influential actors during elections. The interplay of religion and politics in Nigeria can also lead to religious polarization, electoral violence, and the manipulation of religious sentiments for political gain.

Recommendations

The findings of this research reveal that Nigerian democracy, the 2023 general elections and the roles religion plays in the Nigerian electoral process. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Nigerian needs committed leadership, a re-oriented electoral process, Independent electoral body and above all a civil society would help mitigate electoral malpractice in the country.
- ii. The Nigerian government should ensure the protection of religious rights and the extent to which this influences the electoral process.
- iii. Religious leaders and institutions should promote civic education that highlights the importance of religious tolerance, respect for diversity, and active participation in the democratic process.
- iv. The government should ensure that the electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), is true independent and is allowed to dispense its duties without interference.
- v. The police and law enforcement agencies should be equipped properly in order to discover, expose and prove any corruption in the electoral practices.

References

- Alabi, M. (2009). *Electoral reforms and democratic consolidation in Nigeria: The electoral acts 2006*. Retrieved on 24th April, 2024, from <https://theconversation.com>
- Barak, A. (2006). *The judge in a democracy*. Princeton: University Press.
- Bassi, E. (2019). *Evaluation of political parties in Nigeria*. Retrieved on 2nd May, 2024, from <https://www.stuocu.com>
- Biriow, K. (2023). *2023 General elections*. Retrieved 1st May, 2024, from <https://tribuneonline>
- Budge, I. (1996). *The new challenge of direct democracy*. Retrieved on 16th April, 2024, from <https://books.google.com>
- Calligert, D. (2006). *Election rigging and how to fight it*. Maryland: John's Hopkins University.
- Corsini, R. (1999). *The dictionary of psychology*. Retrieved on 4th of July, 2023, from <https://books.google.com>.
- Dewey, J. (1942). *Creative democracy: The task before us*. Retrieved on 2nd July, 2023, from <https://www.beloit.edu/pbk/dewey.html>.
- Diamond, L. (1997). *Consolidating the third wave's democracies*. New York: The John Hopkins.
- Ekunday, W. (2015). *A Critical evaluation of electoral management bodies in Nigeria and the personal problem of the electoral managements since independence in 1960*. Retrieved on 24th April, 2024, from <https://www.journals.rcmss.com>
- Elaigwe, J. (2006). *Causes and manifestation and consequences of electoral violence in Nigeria*. A public lecture delivered on 25th July at the National conference, Abuja.
- Joseph, C. E. (2011). *Credible elections and democratic consolation in Nigeria: The Moral Imperatives*. Retrieved on 3rd May, 2024, from <https://journals.rcmss.com>
- Ladan, M. (2006). *Election violence in Nigerian*. Lagos: AFSTRAG Nigeria.
- Matthew, M. (2023). *Nigeria election 2023: What did we learn from it?* Retrieved on 25th April, 2024, from <https://sharareporters.com>
- Nwobodo, C. (2020). *INEC and the weak electoral system*. Retrieved on 1st May, 2024, from <https://sunnewsonline.com>.
- Okoli, C. (2022). *Votes for cash: The significant of vote buying in Nigeria's democracy*. Retrieved On 30th April, 2024 from <https://theconversation.com>
- Olorok, F. (2023). *Presidential election revealed ethnic, religious, demographic fault lines*. Retrieved on 24th April, 2024, from <https://punchng.com>
- Sarafa, I. O. (2010). *Democracy and good governance: Nigeria's dilemma*. Retrieved on 13th May, 2024, from <http://www.academichjournals.org>
- Sohner, C. (1973). *The people's power: American government and politics today*. Illinois: Scott.
- Suberu, R. T. (2001). *Federalism and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria*. Washington: united States institute for peace.
- Uzoanya, C. (March 28, 2023). *Is Nigeria beyond redemption? Vanguard* (p. 5).