

Religion and Politics in Nigeria: Analysis of the 2023 Presidential Election

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Abstract

Since independence of Nigeria in 1960, religion has continued to play an important role in the country's politics. Political periods are characterized by religious induced diatribes and the wooing of electoral support or votes along religious lines. The implications of this development on the country's political environment and electoral behaviour have elicited scholarly attention. Extant literature, therefore, is replete with the impact of religion on Nigeria's politics. Scholars have researched on the implications of religion for Nigeria's democracy and political stability. However, there is near absence of extant literature on the influence of religion on 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. Thus, this study serves as an intervention to narrow the existing knowledge gap. Using qualitative historical methods, the paper adopts Marxist theoretical analysis and contends that Nigeria's politics is driven by religious considerations as demonstrated in the presidential election in 2023. It argues that religion played an important role in the emergence of Bola Ahmed Tinubu as Nigeria's president. It avails the effects of religion on Nigeria's electoral politics and demonstrate its impact on the outcome of the 2023 presidential election.

Keywords: Religion; Politics; Nigeria; Implications; Presidential Election

Introduction

Though they are two distinct social phenomena, politics and religion work together to shape political trends in pluralistic societies. This is true because political processes in multiple societies are defined and determined by religion. Abbink (2014) argues that in most democracies in Africa, religion often informs the political behaviour of politicians and voters. Ever since gaining independence in 1960, religion has served as the cornerstone of Nigeria's electoral politics. Falola (1998) and Adebani (2010) contend that regardless of one's perspective, religion and politics in Nigeria are inextricably linked. Scholars have responded to the apparent interaction between religion and politics, and it appears that they all agree that religion plays a conflicted role in national politics and voting patterns (Kasfelt, 1994; Marshall, 2009; Onapajo, 2012). Going down memory lane, religion had tremendous impact on Nigeria's electoral culture during the 1964 Federal elections. In a similar vein, religion was a major factor in both the presidential elections of 1979 and 1983, which resulted in the election of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as president of Nigeria. Voting patterns revealed the unpleasant role, with the majority of Muslim-dominated northern states (Kano, Sokoto) supporting Shagari and the majority of Christian-dominated southern states, Jim Nwobodu of the National Peoples Party (NPP) and Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). The effect was seen in the uneasy political atmosphere that characterized the 1979 and 1983 presidential elections.

Religious tolerance was evident in the political process of the nation during the 1992 state elections and the 1993 presidential election. According to Omoruyi (2004), Nigerians voted massively in favour of the Social Democratic Party's Muslim-Muslim ticket. But religion hasn't stopped meddling in the nation's election politics since democratic rule was restored in 1999. According to Onapajo's (2012) assessment, once civilian control has returned, politicians have turned to using religious cards as a political tool. This was clear as early as the 2003 general elections, when the majority of Christian states in the south opted to re-elect President Olusegun Obasanjo, while Muslim-dominated states in northern Nigeria chose General Muhammadu Buhari. And if that weren't enough, the general election of 2011 turned out to be the most divisive in terms of religion. The aftermath of the elections in five northern states—Kaduna, Kano, Bauchi, Gombe, and Bauchi—showed the effect. The victims of this atrocity were Christians. The following general elections took place in 2015 and 2019, with minimal influence from religion. But the nation became divided along religious lines in the general election of 2023 (Adekunle, 2009). Religion first appeared in party politics and later gained popularity as a vote-gathering tactic for the leading candidates of the Labour Party (LP), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and All Progressives Congress (APC).

According to Arogbonlo (2023), these political parties and their presidential candidates used social identification, emphasising aspects of social identity that they had in common, like area, ethnicity, or religion, in order to win over voters. The simultaneous effect was demonstrated by the ethno-religious hatred that predated and followed the election. According to Arogbonlo (2023), this unsightly trend can be traced back to the British bifurcation efforts

during their shameful imperial control in Nigeria. Whatever the case, this study aims to investigate the function and influence of religion in the presidential election of 2023. This study is divided into several connected sections for ease of reading and comprehension, with an ongoing introduction. After that, there are conceptual and theoretical segments, a historical overview of the role of religion in Nigerian politics, an analysis of how religion affected the 2023 presidential election, and, of course, a conclusion.

Religion and Politics Conceptualized

Two concepts or variables undergird this paper. These are religion and politics. Religion on the one hand, has been defined by many scholars from different perspectives. Ugwu (2002:2) defines religion as “faith and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred”. In a more comprehensive manner, Merriam (1980) sees religion as “the outward existence of God... to whom obedience, service and honour are due, the feeling or expression of human love, fear or awe of some superhuman and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life”. Merriam, 1980:450).

To Nmah (2007), religion may be defined from four basic points of view. Subjectively, religion is man’s natural and innate consciousness of his dependence on a transcendent supra-human Being and the consequent natural and spontaneous propensity to render homage and worship to him. Objectively, religion may be defined as a complex or configuration of doctrines, laws and rituals by which man expresses his loyalty to a transcendental Being, God. Conversely, morally speaking, it is described as an attribute, a habit, or a virtue in a person that makes them inclined to honour and worship God to the fullest extent that they can. Therefore, like any other social organisation, religion can also be described institutionally as having a distinct set of beliefs, practices, and values. As can be seen from the concepts above, religion gives society its symbols for understanding the universe (Omotola, 2009). People were typically and effectively connected as a single group with a single heart and soul by beliefs and behaviours related to the sacred. As a result, religion is a system of shared self-interpretation of society.

The word politics on the other hand, is a derivative of the Greek word “politika” (Arogbonlo, 2023). According to Hornby (2000:899), politics has to do with “the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society”. Etymologically, politics refers to the art of governing a city. Nmah (2007) defines politics as the process of adjustment and inter-play of power and interest within the public life and affairs of a society on national and multi-national levels. According to Dahl in Okafor (2007), politics has to do with who gets what, when and how. The very decision to support a particular religion or set of principles in a society as opposed to an individual is a political decision. Politics is essentially about good governance and primarily involves the structuring of power for achieving some articulated goals. According to Easton (1957), politics *is the ability to persuade and influence the sovereign electorate to provide political power and authority in the governmental affairs of the state*. The end goal in politics is how to gain political power by administering the governmental affairs through party affiliation. This is the usual issue and concern of politics as the self-interest for collective recognition and respect; self-actualization and social stratification may have ethical and moral impacts on society.

Theoretical Propositions

Several theories are used to explain the inter-play between religion and politics. For the sake of this study, the Marxist theory is used and adopted. Karl Max, the founder and primary theorist of Marxism, viewed religion as the soul of soulless conditions or the opium of the people. According to Marx, religion in this world of exploitation is an expression of distress and at the same time it is also a protest against the real distress. In other words, religion continues to survive because of oppressive social conditions. In the Marxist interpretation, all modern religions and churches are considered as organs of bourgeois reaction used for the manipulation, exploitation and the stupefaction of the working class (masses) (Jamiu, 2012). Usman (1987), explains political elites in Nigeria play up sentiments around the diverse religion to manipulate and achieve their individual political goals.

Arising from the above, it is clear that either as Muslims or Christians, politicians in Nigeria have tended to use their religious tenets to deceive the electorate in the name of serving the interests of the latter (Jamiu, 2012). The elite have used religion to exploit the innocence of Nigerians during electoral politics. Instead of demanding the needed social changes in Nigeria’s governmental structure that is bedevilled with corruption and other unpleasant socio-economic and political developments, religion is used by the elite to suppress the masses. It is used to create confusion and promote hate within the ranks of the masses by the elites.

Understanding Religion and Politics: The Nigerian Experience

The state of Nigeria is secular. This is due to the nation's ban on designating any one faith as the official state religion. Religion has historically been viewed as a private matter rather than a public one because it falls under the category of secularism (Pew, 2012). All citizens, however, engage in religious activity to the degree that suits them. The ability of religion to intertwine with politics is a basic feature of religion in Nigeria. This indicates that religion has a significant impact on Nigerian politics (Pew, 2012). When colonial governments acknowledged Islam as a civilization,

the interaction between religion and politics began.

By upholding shari'a law and simultaneously westernising southern Nigeria, Islam was included into the colonial administrative politics of the Northern Nigerian Protectorate (and eventually the northern area).

Shari'a was loosened/relaxed during Nigeria's independence era as a result of concessions made by the country, which was the result of the union of numerous ethnic groups with disparate historical narratives, cultural traditions, and political systems. But now there was a rift between the Muslim-majority North and the Christian-dominated South (Rudy and Shan, 2007). Tensions, misgivings, and apprehensions were raised by Ahmadu Bello, the leader of the ruling Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) and grandson of Usman dan Fodio, as well as by the Islamic revivalism agenda. These factors further exacerbated religious divisions. However, Muslims persisted in advocating for the visibility of Islam in Nigerian politics through organisations like Jama'atu Nasril Islam (Society for the Victory of Islam). They claimed that Nigeria's purported secularism was predicated on Western civilization, which is a byproduct of Christian tradition (Rudy and Shan, 2007). This discusses in detail why religion and culture are inextricably linked in Nigeria's northern regions and how politics and public life have become intertwined.

The discussion surrounding the potential inclusion of shari'a law in the 1979 Constitution can be understood in light of the previously stated foundation. Insofar as Nigeria's northern region is concerned, other well-known evidence linking politics and religion is Nigeria's membership in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1986, the 1999 declaration of shari'a states in northern Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency, and most recently, the violent incursions of herders southward. Some, like Governor Samuel Ortom, Professor Wole Soyinka, and the Christian Association of Nigeria, among others, view these as Muslim attempts to mainstream political Islamism. This "threat" foreshadowed the responses of Christians, as Ruth Marshall and Ebenezer Obadare chronicled, as well as the progressive "religionization" of Nigeria's secularism (Sahalu, 2017).

It became necessary to maintain a religious balance in employment, appointments, admittance, pilgrim boards, public prayers, candidates in elections, and other areas as a result of religion influencing state laws and permeating institutions. Nigeria is plainly not a secular state but rather a theocratic diarchy, with Christianity and Islam having equal and substantial influence over the political system (Sahalu, 2017). Religious sensitivity is therefore quite high. And for this reason, religion is an essential element in comprehending and placing into perspective specific political behaviours.

At this point, it is important to emphasise that religious tolerance has gotten worse throughout time as a result of politics becoming more and more influenced by religion. Religious bigotry has taken many forms, including the rise in violent religious conflicts, the emergence of fundamentalist groups, the proliferation of Hijab activism by Muslim students in southwest Nigeria, and the impediment to the long-standing religious balancing in political posts within religiously bipolar states. Katrin Gänslar has referred to this declaration of some states in northern Nigeria as "a political drawcard" (Sekoni, 2014).

Political involvement by religious lobby groups is on the rise, and they are trading votes for policies that will benefit them after elections. For instance, according to The Democrat (1994), in 2015, the Joint Muslim Forum decided to endorse "any Lagos governorship contender that backs the use of hijab in public schools." Similar to this, religious organisations like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) openly backed President Goodluck Jonathan when Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor was in office, giving the former unrestricted access to the White House. As can be seen from our analysis of the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria, where our examples are primarily drawn from the presidential elections, it has become "normal" for Muslim and Christian religious leaders to support and publicly or covertly campaign for their preferred candidate, who frequently happens to be a member of their faith (Pew, 2012).

The Trajectory of the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria and the Victory of APC Candidate

It is vital to identify some historical facts about Nigerian democracy in order to understand the significance of religion at the nascent stage of partisan politics in Nigeria in 2023, particularly with regard to the presidential elections (Arogbonlo, 2023). To determine the relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria, three premises must be established. First, since independence, no candidate who shares the same faith as the incumbent president has ever been chosen to follow them, with the exception of President Ahmed Bola Tinubu, who succeeded President Muhammadu Buhari. Second, the president and his vice never come from the same religious background or practise the same religion. Tinubu and Shattima's rise to prominence in the 2023 presidential race altered this rule. Thirdly, no elected president has ever replaced another from the same region, whether they are from the North or the South. This is one example of how politics and religion interact in Nigeria; the record has not been surpassed to this day.

These facts might appear to be coincidences. However, since Nigeria emerged to be a peaceful geographical entity, they represent the religious and regional sensitivities that even the political elite recognise, embrace, and practise

(Arogbonlo, 2023). Nonetheless, the three previously mentioned realities are in jeopardy as the 2023 presidential race approaches. Nigeria is perhaps not prepared for such a drastic shift, even though any attempt to question the current state of affairs would be viewed as progressive (Kukah, 2012). However, the candidates of the three political parties that were most likely to win the elections surfaced in a way that sparks discussions and arguments on the identity issue (Jatau, et al., 2023).

Muslims from the South and the North, respectively, were Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the presidential candidate of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), and Kashim Shettima, his vice candidate. Atiku Abubakar, the front-runner of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), a Muslim from the North, whereas Ifeanyi Okowa, his running mate, a Christian from the South. Peter Obi, a Christian from the South, was the presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP), and his running mate Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed, a Muslim from the North (Jatau, et al, 2023). The APC was not the first political party to present the primal pattern, which bases counterbalancing and balancing on zonal and religious patterns. They adopted new strategies that were progressive in the nation-building endeavour.

The APC's selection of candidates faced intense criticism for downplaying Nigeria's religious sensitivities, as is the case in any divided country. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which serves as the umbrella organisation for Christians in Nigeria, declared that "a Muslim-Muslim ticket was not suitable for the current situation in the country" and urged Nigerians to "accept or reject" it (Malomo, 2022). The APC's decision, in the words of Sokoto Diocese's Catholic Bishop Mathew Kukah, "was reprehensible [and] not acceptable". While some northern Christians who protested in Abuja called it an insult. APC leaders in Northern Nigeria argued that "Nigeria is not...a theocracy" and characterised the decision as "a display of crass insensitivity to the complexity of modern Nigeria and the entire Church" (Jatau, et al, 2023). The PDP presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar concurred that the APC's selection was inappropriate for a nation such as Nigeria. However, APC contended that its choice prioritises performance, competence, and pragmatism over identity politics. The aforementioned claims of competency were denied by Rev. Pastor Marioghae, who called them ridiculous and a slap in the face of Nigerian Christians (Olorok, 2023):

Rev. Tony Marioghae, on Thursday, faulted the decision of the presidential candidate of the All-Progressives Congress, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, to pick a Muslim, Kashim Shettima, as his running mate for the 2023 election, describing it as "foolish" and a slap on Christians of Northern extraction. He also warned that Nigeria must get it right in 2023, because "we have moved dangerously closer to the precipice of disaster due to our poor political choices". According to him, although Tinubu's argument of competence as the reason for the choice of Shettima was plausible, he reasoned that there were also capable Christian political leaders from the Northern region who could have complimented him as well.

However, the APC fervently pursued religious balance in its campaigns even as it deemphasized religion in the selection of its candidates. For example, Tinubu allegedly employed phoney bishops for an event to introduce his deputy, a move that infuriated the Christian communities even more. However, there is no denying that the APC's disregard for religious tolerance sparked problems that were anchored on ethno-religious tolerance, particularly in north-central Nigeria, where the current administration was accused of being complacent about the farmer-herders' predicament (Siegle and Cook, 2023).

By weighing regional, ethnic, and religious sensitivities in its decision-making and exercising caution when it comes to religiously sensitive matters, PDP, in contrast to APC, had maintained a secular stance. Nonetheless, Atiku's decision to remove his tweets and Facebook posts denouncing the murderous murder of Deborah Samuel, a Christian accused of blasphemy, in response to threats from Islamic fundamentalists to stop supporting him, revealed his attitude towards the significance of religion in politics and the necessity of using it (Siegle and Cook, 2023). However, after eight years of Buhari's administration, the religious sentiment of one Muslim succeeding another was stoked by the PDP's selection of a Fulani Muslim as the potential successor to the president, who also had the same identity.

The Labour Party (LP) presidential candidate, Peter Obi was also criticised by PDP and APC supporters for his public visits to Christian congregations, calling him a "Christian candidate" and a "crusade mobilizer" who was using Christian religious leaders to canvass for votes (Siegle and Cook, 2023). Apart from that in July 2022, a suspected support group distributed a Muslim prayer mat with Obi's face on it, which was considered a sacrilege. The controversy caused by this demand for an official apology and answer from Obi. These all make reference to religious sensibilities and how important it is to respect them.

Arising from the above, religion undoubtedly influenced how people voted throughout Nigeria. The major parties attempted to avoid offending any of the major religions and may subtly make religious appeals. LP was expected to challenge PDP's long-standing dominance of the Southeast and South-South regions and also perform well in the North-Central region, building on his relative competence, thrift, transparency record, appeal to teaming youths, and support from Christian populations (Jatau, et al., 2023). This was more probable due to the anxiety around the alleged

goal of the Islamization thesis, which has been made popular by stakeholders like Mailafia Obadiah, T. Y. Danjuma, Samuel Ortom, and others (Salahu, 2023). Nonetheless, in an attempt to split the Muslim voting blocs in northwest and northeast Nigeria, the APC somewhat compromised by running a Muslim-Muslim ticket. The PDP did well in the North East and competed with the LP for a sizable portion of the South-South vote share.

Conclusion

This study examined the interconnectivity between politics and religion in Nigeria, specifically in relation to the 2023 presidential election. It argued that the pattern of party politics in Nigeria was defined in large part by religion. This is due to the fact that religious concerns focus on beliefs and ideals that are inflexible from a political and practical standpoint. Underestimating the importance of religious inclusion poses a hazard to national security in a sensitive and divided country such as Nigeria. Because politics and religion are intertwined, any “politically favoured” religion is thought to inevitably gain an advantage over the other in terms of politics and the economy. This creates a perception of relative deprivation or horizontal inequality, which has been shown to be a prelude to acts of political violence. For example, the dispute over the Muslim-Muslim ticket served as the catalyst for religiously motivated post-election complaints in many regions of the nation.

Additionally, religious differences have led to a number of complicated issues that the nation faces, including resource nationalism, armed banditry, farmer-herder conflict, Boko Haram insurgency, and other issues that are either ignored or mostly unresolved. Fears of Islamization have arisen since the APC-led administration of Muslim-Muslim ticket emerged. It follows that the government ought to combat insurgency, banditry, and disputes between farmers and herders in order to alter this narrative. Since Senator Ali Modu Sheriff and other politicians have accused APC vice presidential candidate Shettima of having ties to Boko Haram, the government's inaction on the problems caused by the group and the Fulani militants will be seen as "evidence" of the Islamization agenda.

Besides, kidnappings and conflicts between farmers and herders in southern Nigeria would be seen as acts of jihadism, evoking hysterical reactions that will focus more on the identity of the offenders than their actual crimes. Consequently, resource nationalism and secessionist tendencies might grow stronger, putting the nation even closer to collapse. Here, striking a balance between religious representation in government will depend greatly on Arend Lijphart's power-sharing suggestions. Restoring confidence would also heavily depend on putting an end to the destabilisation of Christian communities in the northern and southern areas as well as the actions of Fulani bandits.

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