

POLITICAL ACTORS AND THE GOD FACTOR IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

A Free and Fair electoral process is considered a fulcrum on which any democracy stands. Therefore both the leaders and the electorates spare no energy to ensuring that the process is based on seamless transaction with a continuity of management. The Nigerian democracy is not oblivious of this international accepted best practice and seems to keeping itself within the ambit. However, glaring ethnic and religious factors of hegemonic nature of some sections of the polity have over the years obstructed a genuine electoral process and by extension a peaceful democracy. This paper investigates the above in the face of current insecurity and threat to national unity as being orchestrated from almost all fronts of national life. The Paper aims at exposing schism which fraught electoral brews and at the same time brings to the center, the immediate, middle and long term benefits of fraudulent free process. To achieve this aim, both phenomenological and descriptive methods are employed to denigrate the prevailing albatross of the Nigerian electoral process and the capacity of the "God Factor" to strengthen or damage democracy in a lucid account. The findings of the paper include, that a fair electoral process is worthy of the political class support if only the prospects tilt in their favor. Their acclaimed support for credible elections is thus pretentious and deceitful as all of them are complicit in electoral malpractices. Finally, this paper postulates that the agent of the "God Factor" as a matter of duty should distance itself from sectionalism and religious intolerance in the national life. Furthermore, the gains of fairness in the electoral process should be conversed vigourously while using advantages and positions as shapers of public opinions.

Keywords: Politics, Electorates, Political actors, God Factor, Hegemony.

INTRODUCTION

By the letters of some sections and sub-sections of the 1999 Constitution as amended, Nigeria is a secular state and that is where it ends, in letters! Nigeria is an amalgam of different ethnic groups with different religious backgrounds. These multiplicities were so pronounced at the time of independence that political party formations and governance were starkly based on regions and deeply religious: Action Group (AG), Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), among other minority ethnic groups parties.

These brought tension and mutual distrust that culminated in a bloody coup that was orchestrated by young Igbo army officers which triggered counter bloody coup by northern army officers that ultimately led to a bitter civil war from 1967-1970. Since then, political and

elections process have tilted towards the vortex of ethnicity and religion as the God factor has become an appealing vista for votes poaching. It bears repeating that political actors in Nigeria are well aware of those things that have always divided the citizens of the country and have tried all they can to keep the citizens divided in order to gain control of power and have access to national resources so as to control its distribution enabled by the faux federal system of government.

This national schism that has orchestrated bad governance and engendered poverty, mutual distrust and violence informed this research. It is therefore aimed at investigating the extent of God factor employed by Nigerian politicians and the extent it has affected the provision of democratic dividends and infrastructural development. The paper argues that rather than appeal to reason as against appealing to religious and ethnic affiliations using God as a factor to gain political office, it has only aided in the retrogression of the country. The paper fears that until these are addressed post haste, the country will remain stagnant.

The Place of Religion in Nigeria

Nigeria as a nation is religiously pluralistic. Apart from the three major religions, Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion, there are several others competing for relevance and recognition. In spite of this reality, in theory, Nigeria is a secular state. This has been indicated in the constitution since independence. For the purpose of emphasis, the word, secular, is derived from the Latin word '*Secularis*', which means temporal. It is taken to mean 'of or relating to worldly, as opposed to sacred things or having no particular religious affinities.' Secularism, as a doctrine, rejects religion. It maintains that religion should have no place in civil affairs and civil rules should have no interest in religion. Thus, a secular state is a state where religious communities have no recognized role in politics and no formal relation to the state. This is different from a theocratic or a religious state where religion determines what happen in the state.

As stated in section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, "the government of the federation shall not adopt any religion as State Religion." Therefore, in policy formulation, governance, and other governmental activities, religion should not be an issue. By implication, every citizen has a right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Section 38 is categorical, that:

1. Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom (either alone or in community with others and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony, or observance relates to a religion, other than his own or a religion not approved by his parents or guardian, and

3. No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

The constitution further emphasizes that national integration shall actively be encouraged. Accordingly, discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic, or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited, while national ethics shall be Discipline, Integrity, Dignity of Labour, Social Justice, Religious Tolerance, Self-reliance, and Patriotism. Also, membership of political parties is opened to every citizen irrespective of his place of origin, circumstances of birth, sex, religion, or ethnic group (Umeanolue, 4-5).

It is as paradoxical as it is baffling that even though the constitution prominently declares that Nigeria is a secular state, it still remains “one of the most religious countries in world” it is not surprising that religion features prominently in the country’s elections” (Onapajo, 1). Onapajo further argued that it plausible to note that religion takes centre stage in the major spheres of social life, including politics, in Nigeria. This is due to the nature of identity politics in Nigeria and this has led to the entrenchment of religion in Nigerian politics. “This is more visible during election seasons as politicians characteristically, but deceptively, make use of religious rhetoric as a powerful instrument to mobilise voters, which has often led to incidents of religious conflict” (Onapajo, 2).

Nicholas J. Demerath (2003) described the relationship of religion and politics with the metaphor of a moth circling a flame. He explained that the moth is drawn to the warmth and light of the flame, and seeks to fly close enough to receive the benefits of the heat without getting burned, but as the optimal distance or proximity is difficult to calculate, increasing benefits entail increasing risks. He concluded that “when religion keeps its distance, it maintains purity at the risk of a precious but often irrelevant marginality; when religion approaches the flame, it experiences relevance at the risk of being consumed” (Demerath, 1 cited by Skjøtskift, 10). This explains what happens in Nigeria. By dragging religion into politics, religion has risked being irrelevant except only when used as a weapon for violence or agency for achieving political ambitions. The God factor is weaponized.

TRENDS IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA

A political party is simply a body of organized individuals whose ultimate aim and goal is to contest for governmental power through the instrumentality of elections (Zainawa, 2). This paper investigates the above in the face of current insecurity and threat to national unity as being orchestrated from almost all fronts of national life. The Paper aims at exposing schism which fraught electoral brews and at the same time brings to the center, the immediate, middle and long term benefits of fraudulent free process.

Zainawa observed that while political parties under an egalitarian democratic system deepen democracy by ensuring credible, transparent, free and fair electoral process in line with their manifestos and ideologies, the contrary is the case in Nigeria as experiences of lack of adherence to procedures, godfatherism, disrespect for rules and laws, manipulation and abuse of system, malpractices and several other unethical behavior by political parties cast

doubt as regards the relevance of political parties in promoting credible and transparent electoral process and democracy in Nigeria (Zainawa, 1).

To buttress this position, Zainawa quoted Alli (2015) as saying that “one of the most crucial and yet least developed democratic institutions in Nigeria is the Political Party system. The registered Political Parties in the country are assemblage of People with the same level of determination to use the party platform to get to power. As such it is usually difficult to identify any party programmes or ideologies. The structure of the Political Parties is such that internal democracy is virtually absent. The political parties are weak and unable to effectively carry out political mobilization, political education and discipline” (Zainawa, 2).

The God Factor in Nigerian Politics

Afolabi (2015) in his deposition postulated that religion and politics in Nigeria are intertwined even as both the politicians and religious leaders use it as a tool for negative purposes. The former use it to get into political offices while the latter abuse it for economic gains from the politicians. Either way, Nigeria, as a country, is the unmitigated sole loser. Invariably, he nonetheless argued conclusively that for the Nigerian society to be better it is incumbent on godly people to venture into politics (Afolabi, 1-2). In his earlier contention that religion has been used as a tool for negative purposes against the country, it is ludicrous, if not contradictory, for him to conclude that only the religious or the godly can salvage the country from its present predicament.

Isah (2019) similarly contended that over the years, politicians have exploited Nigeria's religious make-up to serve their interests, often leading to electoral clashes. He cited the violence that erupted in 2011 post-election that claimed more than 800 lives(<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31026554>) and displaced 65,000 people when former President Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian, was declared winner of the presidential elections. Violence erupted following protests that a Muslim northerner, Muhammadu Buhari (the current President of Nigeria) was supposed to win the elections (Isah, 2).

Odudele (2017) argued that Christians who venture into politics should see themselves as been called by God and their offices as demonstrating their calling as being the salt and light of the world when he said that “the Christian politician must for example seek the will of God, walk daily with God who calls (sic) him into partisan politics, apply biblical principles in his politicking, have godly advisors” (Odudele, 2).

Similarly, Umeanolue (2020) submitted that religion or the God factor is a mainstay phenomenon in Nigerian politics that influences governance, policy formulation and the electoral process. He also observed that this influence could be both positive and negative “as religion enhances national development, so also it could be counterproductive” (Umeanolue, 1).

In his exploration of the nexus between politics and religion in Nigeria, Ojo (2020), stated unequivocally that “the extent of religious cleavages remains substantial and has not

diminished over the years. These cleavages follow the Christian/Muslim divide, aside from the denominational differences in many African states” (Ojo, 1).

God Factor in the Electoral Process in Nigeria

“I can die for the cause of Islam if necessary. We are prepared to fight another civil war. We cannot be blackmailed into killing Sharia.” – Muhammadu Buhari (Freedom House, 2000)

“I will continue to show openly and inside me the total commitment to the Sharia movement that is sweeping all over Nigeria. God willing, we will not stop the agitation for the total implementation of the Sharia in the country.” – Buhari (News24, August 27, 2001)

In order to impress the Muslim electorate, Mr. Tinubu, the APC presidential candidate, made a futile attempt at reciting *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, the first Surah of the Qur’an. This excited more anger from the core northern Muslims at whom this was directed as they could not imagine how a presidential aspirant and an aged man, who is supposed to be a worthy Muslim is unable to recite even a single *ayat* of the Qur’an. The aim of this effort about invoking God into politics was thoroughly defeated.

Commenting further on this, Jaafar a journalist, noted that the “average Muslim voters in the North don’t care about Tinubu’s blabbing gaffes in campaign rhetoric, but worry about his cringe-worthy mistakes on Qura’nic verses, especially the Opener/Mother of Qur’an. Tinubu is not under obligation to recite Qura’nic verses during campaign. The more he makes these unforgivable mistakes during campaign, the less popular he becomes among Muslim voters (Ogunsemore, 2). From this comment, it is crystal clear how deep rooted the God factor has been in the determining the electoral process and franchise fortunes in Nigeria.

Muslim-Muslim ticket

Tinubu’s choice of Shettima, also a Muslim is a display of stark selfishness. Their desire is to just win the election and nothing more. They are not concerned about the divisions their choices have caused along religious and ethnic lines. Nigeria is between the devil and the deep blue sea. Should power be retained in the north through Atiku, the Hausa/Fulani will have found tremendous confidence in that precedence as they will tell others to go to hell. They will keep the power up north. Should the Muslim-Muslim ticket succeed, then, Christians can go to hell as going forward no one will care about them. There is no way on earth these two scenarios will enhance national integration (Nenge, in press).

Fake bishops at the APC inauguration

It was funny that after choosing to run a Muslim-Muslim ticket, the APC purportedly rented some ‘bishops’ to attend the unveiling of his deputy. This was an attempt to provide a modicum of credibility to the ticket as to make it look like some Christians are much at home with it. In reaction, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) said

BAT (Bola Ahmed Tinubu) is free to hire mechanics and other artisans and sew clerical garments for them. An effort that will only add to their many ropes when the political exercise is over but will not change the need for fairness and justice that CAN is calling for. CAN appreciate that we are in a democracy, no

need to do funny and dubious things just to prove a point because it will in the end bounce back... (Oyoyo, 3).

Muslim clerics asking Muslims to vote for Muslims

"Muslims should only vote those who will promote Islam. We are more than the Christians if you add our Muslim brothers in the West."- Buhari (Liberty Radio Kaduna, 2003)

In a video posted on Twitter (2019, February 16), a Muslim scholar and Imam with a significant following, Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir, the Chairman Council of Ulama of JIBWIS, Jos, is heard admonishing his followers in Hausa language to be careful of the Igbos (in obvious reference to Peter Obi who was on the ticket with Abubakar Atiku) because they were the ones who killed Sardauna calling the Igbos "*mugun inyamurai*." Loosely translated this means "wicked *inyamiri* (a derogatory name for) Igbo.

Some Muslim clerics are of the opinion that the Muslim-Muslim ticket has defined the supremacy of Islam in Nigeria therefore every Muslim has a duty to vote the Tinubu/Shettima's APC ticket into power on February 25, 2023. Abdulmutallab Mohammad Auwal, a frontline Kano Based Islamic cleric and the champion of this school of thought said that the ticket is without doubt a call for Jihad:

This meeting was convened by our group, Islamic Preachers and we've invited about 75 Muslim groups, including the Kaduna State Izala and the Jos (Plateau state) Izala, the Salafiya, Kadariya, IMWAN, Muslims in Da'awa, Women in Da'awa. Also here are groups like Yoruba and Igbo Muslim groups. Last but not the least, we have here the Kano Imams' group. The import of today's sitting is to let the clerics and indeed all Muslim leaders know that the Muslim/Muslim ticket is not about mere promises of bringing dividends of democracy like road and infrastructure. This ticket is about the supremacy of Islam. This ticket has honoured Islam. Therefore, we'll honour it with our ballots (Sahara Reporters, 3-4).

It is safe to say that this ticket got some Christians enraged and some Muslims engaged. The Christians are enraged because of the insensitive nature of the ticket that failed to acknowledge the multivalent nature of the country while the some Muslims are engaged and happy because they feel if this ticket muscles itself to power, it shows the supremacy of Islam and this might remain so in perpetuity.

While some argue that the religious affiliation of aspirants do not matter as their competence, the argument rightly so given the fact that the choice in political contests in Nigeria is based on winning elections, it is as baffling as it is befuddling that fake bishops or clerics were still rented to attend the unveiling of Shettima. Truth is that Nigeria is a state with lots of peculiarities – religion and ethnic as both are sensitive issues that generate discourses and even tension in the country hence the success or otherwise of the electoral process is contingent on them.

Christian-Muslim/Muslim-Christian Ticket

The Christian-Muslim/Muslim-Christian ticket, while it is still an exercise that reflects the God factor in the electoral process in Nigeria geared towards harvesting electoral fortunes, it yet reflects the sensitivities of Nigeria's peculiarities especially in a country like Nigeria where 'a feeding-bottle and food is ready federalism' is practiced. Since the winner takes all in Nigeria, it is wisdom to make room for a broader representation of the multi-various blocs for equity, fairness and justice. It is hypocritical to deny that the God factor is deep rooted in Nigerian politics and polity as the two religions namely Christianity and Islam are pitched in the battle of supremacy.

Hegemonic effect of the Trifecta

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation-state. It is estimated that there are over 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria. However, there are three majority ethnic groups namely Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo. This is what this paper calls "the trifecta." Other minority ethnic groups are either subsumed under these three or made irrelevant with sustainable systemic marginalization and deliberately orchestrated violence. The trifecta insists that the presidency must come from among their ranks or nothing hence it is a common sing-song to hear them harangue on "the Igbo presidency" "a president of Yoruba extraction *Emi 'lo kan*," or "northern president" never to be heard about a Nigerian president. This is the bedrock of this uncharitable hegemony.

Odubajo and Alabi (2014) writing on political-power dynamics that determines the trajectory of the electoral process, acknowledged that it is onerous task to manage a heterogeneous society like Nigeria especially given the hegemonic inclinations of the elite. They argued that "the elite class, which by virtue of the capitalist orientation of the state holds the ace in determining political-power dynamics in Nigeria" (Odubajo and Alabi, 1). This is lamentably so because of the nature of government that is been run in Nigeria. The so-called federalism as is obtained in the country is rent seeking, a feeding bottle economy in which the winner of the electoral process takes all and determines who gets what. Odubajo and Alabi lay the blame of this scenario at the feet of the colonialists who bequeathed a faulty polity "upon which political-power dynamics would be a straight-fight between the various centres of elite domination" to indigenous politicians. They suggested that only a revolution is capable of ushering in a change in the status quo.

Federalism is arguably the suitable framework for addressing ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism in a complex society like Nigeria. In such system, each region or state is allowed to control its resources and develop at its own pace. However, Nigeria who claims to run a federal system of government operates the opposite and does not recognize the identities, interest and needs of the people especially the minorities. The nation's constitution does not reflect the wishes of the people; most government policies are anti-people and do not engender national integration and cohesion (Ilesanmi, 2014 in Omoghnene and Okolie, 1).

Based on the above assertion, it is pertinent and safe to say that resource sharing is a major determinant factor in the electoral process in Nigeria. Those who have the keys or the lock combination to the national till employ and deploy every means, including ethnic hegemony and religious manipulation or the God factor to cajole, hoodwink or dragoon the electorate

into voting them. In some cases, the elite brazenly distort the electoral process into favouring them or their cohort knowing that there are no consequences for their actions.

Ilesanmi said it even better:

Politics today in Nigeria is a 'do or die' affair. The struggle for political power and control at the centre has over-heated the nation's polity and created unnecessary tension which has resulted to bigotry between and among regions. Political thugs are recruited and armed by these same politicians who at the end of the day loose grip of these thugs and these arms are used on defenseless citizens (Ilesanmi 2014 cited in Omoghnene and Okolie, 2).

Omoghnene and Okolie (2020), in an examination of the effects of ethnicity, religion and politics on national development in Nigeria averred that "ethnic chauvinism, youth restiveness, corruption, religious bigotry and extremism, and others are social vices that undermine national development" (Omoghnene and Okolie, 1). This unfortunate truth cannot be overemphasized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper makes the following recommendations to politicians, religious leaders and the Nigerian citizens:

1. Politicians should desist or refrain from using the name of God as a pretext to clinch political offices. They should remain true to the provisions of the Constitutions declaring Nigeria a secular state.
2. Using God's name and making unfulfilled promises amount to taking or using his name in vain. God should be left out of politics as elections contest should be determined by reasons adduced by politicians.
3. Religious leaders should refrain from aiding and abetting the denigrating of God's name by politicians through affording them platforms like church or mosque gatherings.
4. Religious leaders should strive to keep the name of God is pure as it is holy completely insulated from the deceptions of politics and politicians.
5. Religious leaders should endeavour to stop politicians or should not get involved in weaponizing religion for patronage from politicians.
6. Citizens should ignore and refuse to vote political actors who use the God factor for political gain.
7. Citizens should refuse to be divided by politicians who use religion as a factor for electioneering purposes.
8. Citizens should ask politicians to tell them what they will do rather than acquiesce when God's name is thrown into the fray. This is why it is difficult to hold Nigerian politicians accountable.
9. Citizens should note that the prevailing economic backwardness, religious violence, injustice and political turmoil are consequences of using the God factor to attain political offices. Going forward, such politicians should be rejected and treated with ignominy.

CONCLUSION

That Nigeria is backward due to politicians using religion and the God factor to divide and rule is truism as sad and unfortunate as it is over the years. This assertion is informed by the findings of this paper. Politicians use the name of God to freely deceive and encourage voting on those divisive lines through which mediocrity has been entrenched. Unqualified persons have found their ways into political offices where governance is reduced to the lowest ebb thereby fostering electoral malpractices, infrastructural decay and regional violence as separatist agitations are rife due to marginalization of other ethnic groups based on religious affinities. Until this is addressed, the prognosis will remain grim and the future gloomy.

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