



The Role of Islam in Resolving Religious Crisis in the Nigerian Politics

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Abstract

This paper examines the religious crisis in Nigerian politics in relation to Islam and Christianity. Muslims are being accused of the attempt to impose Islam on Nigeria while the Christians are mobilizing the adherents of the religion to resist it. The case is worst with the attempt of the religious leaders using religion to plant the adherents of their faith, especially as the president or vice president of Nigeria. The Christian Association of Nigeria resists Muslims as president and vice president of Nigeria. The stand of the Association is upheld by many Christian individuals and groups across the length and breadth of the Country. The two religious leaders are struggling for political domination of Nigeria. A lot of factors are responsible for their stand. These include the failure of our political leadership, unsatisfied with the positions of the political institutions and governance, and fear of domination by a certain religious denomination. Our recommendations consist of selection of credible candidate irrespective of religious affiliation, removal of bias against the candidate of a given religious denomination and voting out incompetent leaders regardless of his or her political or religious affiliation. The write-up makes use of observation and secondary sources which include books and journals.

Keywords: Islam, Christianity, Association, politics and affiliation.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is multi-religious country with three major religions of Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion (A.T.R.). Islam and Christianity are the two major religions that are frequent in the Nigeria political system. In many cases, religion is not considered in the selection of the governor and deputy governor, and other political appointments at the state and local government levels. Most of the political leaders in the North are Muslims while the South is dominated by the Christians. Religion is not considered in the formation of political party or in joining a political party. In the exercise of franchise, religion is not a condition. Muslims and Christians are registered together in a given political unit without any discrimination.

In a family, especially in Yoruba land, there are Muslims and Christians without religious discrimination. In some cases, the head of the family is a Christian while the Secretary is a Muslim vice-versa. In a nuclear family, the husband may be a Muslim while the wife is a Christian. The two of them will be living together without any problem. In many tertiary institutions, there are the departments of Religious Studies where we have Muslim and Christian Lecturers who endure each other. Examples are Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, and Bamidele Olumilua University of Education Science and Technology, Ikere Ekiti, where Islamic Studies, Christian Religious Studies and African Traditional Religion lecturers and students coexist.

In the erection of buildings in a given society, the Muslims and Christians intermingled with each other. There is no discrimination in the buying and selling of commodities. Muslims and Christians perform different functions together without differentiation of religious denomination. The question is why is it in the appointment of president and vice president that we have outcry for religious denomination? Why it is



some people are trying to use religious affiliation to get to political power? These and other emerging questions will be dealt with in the course of this write-up.

2. Clarification of concept

2.1 Nigeria

Nigeria is a country with more than four hundred languages and two hundred and fifty ethnic groups (Barkindo and Dyikuk 2022: 1). The country is the largest one in West Africa with the population of 218,440,044 as at October, 10, 2022 (National Population Commission). The Worldometer puts its population at 217,807,691 as of Sunday, October 16, 2022. The variation in their estimation is as a result of the independent estimates from the two different bodies. If the actual and correct census is done, the variation may not be up to 632,350 as seen in these estimates. Adesete (2018: 328) opines that the Nigeria is the most famous nation in Sub-Sahara Africa and ranks in the tenth position in the World. Pontianus and Oruonye (2021: 136) state that Nigeria has the highest population among the black race and one of the highly populated less develop countries in the World.

Nigeria is divided into 6 geopolitical zones for administrative purpose. This was done during the military era of General Sanni Abatch (1993-1998). The six geopolitical zones, States and Local Governments within them form the basis for the division of economic, education, political and other national resources in Nigeria (Legit). The territory known as the Northern State was divided into 3. The Eastern State was split into 2 while the Western State remains as one. The divisions and the States under them are stated below:

1. North Central: Benue, Federal Capital Territory, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau States.
2. North East: Adamawa, Bauch, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe States.
3. North West: Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Kebbi, Sokoto, Jigawa, and Zamfara States.
4. South East: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States.
5. South-South: Akwa Ibon, Bayelsa, Cross-River, and Delta States.
6. South West: Ekiti, Lagos, Osun, Ondo, Ogun, and Oyo States (Research Gate).

One thing that is noticeable in these divisions is that the States are not evenly distributed within the geopolitical zones. The distribution of the States ranges from four to eight in the zones. Historically, the Northern Territory was divided into 3 while the Southern Territory was equally divided into 3 of unequal sizes.

Australia Refugee Review Tribunal (2007) opines that majority of the people living in the northern Nigeria are Muslims. The Christians form the highest population in the southern Nigeria. The Tribunal puts the Muslims as half of the population of Nigeria while the Christians form forty percent of the population. The remaining ten percent constitutes adherents of African Traditional Religion (A.T.R.), other beliefs and those who have no religion. In fact, most Hausa and Fulanis are Muslims while most Igbos is Christians. In Yoruba land, the Christians are a little above the Muslims. The little difference in the percentages of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria form one of the major reasons for the religious competition in the Nigerian politics.

2.2 Politics

Politics according to Merriam Webster is the science that deals with guiding or influencing government policy. It is also the art or science dealing with how to win an election and hold the control of the government of a given country. The political affair as states by the dictionary is the competition between various interest groups or individuals for the power and leadership position especially in the government of a given nation. Politics, especially in Nigeria involves the formation of political parties, registration of the



parties, registration and collection of voters' cards, exercise one's franchise and contest for a particular position if one has interest. The winning of the election makes one to become the leader in the area of one's constituency irrespective of the political party he or she belongs. He or she must treat everybody in his or her constituency well no matter the political party they belong to.

3. Positive functions of religion

Religion according to Eze (2020:6) and Puja, Libraries, is expected to perform the following positive functions in a given society:

1. Religion helps its adherents to proffer solution to the fear of Allah (God). It assists individuals and group of individuals to get rid of pain, fear and anxiety.
2. It serves as an avenue to adjust to one's belief on the existence of God.
3. It proffers explanations to the means of salvation of a man.
4. Religion controls social behavior of man. It makes the understanding of the rules and regulations of one's religion and stay away from the forbidden things and engage on the permitted actions.
5. It unites its adherents irrespective of color, race, tribe and social status in the society. In Islam, especially in the performance of the holy pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah, the Muslims all over the World are seen performing the same action and at the same time. In the daily prayers, there is no discrimination among the rich and the poor people.
6. Religion provides answers to many questions that may be bordering an individual. If there is anything that he does not understand, he can go to the learned in terms of his religion to get solution without paying any money.
7. Religion provides guidelines to every individual in their daily activities covering every aspect of man. That is why religious scriptures are sent to man through their Prophets. In Islam, the last guideline which is the Qur'ān, was sent to the Muslims through Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He corroborated the Qur'ān with other sources of Islamic Law like the Hadith, Qiyas and Ijma.
8. It assists the adherents of religion to adapt to any situation in which they may find themselves. Whatever situation they find themselves, they believe that it is their destiny. This faith is more common to Hausa/Fulani Muslims than other tribes in Nigeria.
9. Religion is an easy way to identify a person. Through religion, a Muslim may easily be identified. Likewise, any other religion in the country.
10. Religion is a good way of preserving the values and moral of a given society. Part of ways of knowing a Muslim is his way of dressing and spare of beard. Some Christian denominations adopt the use of suits and head covering.
11. Religion promotes welfare of its members and inculcates the desire of helping the needy and the poor people. Qur'ān, 9:60 was devoted for this purpose.
12. Religion makes man to understand the reason for his existence. The purpose of the creation of man according to Qur'ān, 51:56 is to serve God.
13. Religion entrenches the principle of accountability. It makes one to know that one day he is going to account for every of his action on earth. That is the reason why the books of God enumerate the good and bad actions. They silenced on some issues to allow interpretations by the religious leaders. Anybody who chooses a good action is expected to enter paradise in the Day of Judgment. The opposite is the hell-fire.
14. Religion is a means of checkmating the political leaders in the society. That is why they do swear the oath of office with their respective book of religion. By swearing the oath of office with their religious books, it is expected that they will perform their duties and obligations in accordance with the dictate of their religions.



15. In terms of economy, religion expects both the leaders and followers to stay away from fraud, emblems, bribery and corruption, and the like. Religion wants the political and economic leaders to formulate and execute the economic policies that will be beneficial to the citizens living in a given country.

4. Freedom of religion

The issue of freedom of religion is both national and international concern. In fact, every human being is entitled to the freedom of religion irrespective of the religious faith one belongs (Omojola 2018:18). Olomjobi (2016:9) states that in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly accepted and adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on religious affairs. He says that its article 2(1) asserts that every human being is qualified for the rights and freedoms entrenched in this article without any discrimination as regards race, color, sex, language, religion, political, social origin or in any other form. Article 18 states that everybody is entitled to the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right consists of the freedom to change one's religion at will in any place he lives. He could do this individually or collectively. The change could be in private or in public. He can manifest his religion in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Article 27 states that his religion should not be tampered with on the basis of belonging to minority religion or ethnic group or logistic variation. One of the purposes of the declaration of Fundamental Human Rights by the United Nations is to promote and encourage respect for the rights without discrimination of any kind on the basis of race, sex, language, religion or any other form. (Garba 2020: 59).

Section 38 of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria adopted the above provisions of fundamental human rights by the United Nations (Ezeanokwasa et al 2016: 57, Olomjobi 2016: 12). The constitution adds that no institution is permitted to force religious instruction on any candidate or take part in any religious ceremony or observance other than his own religion or the one accepted by his parents or guardian. It states further that no religious society or denomination should be disallowed from providing religious instruction for pupils of that society or denomination in any of the places of education maintained wholly by that society or denomination (Olomjobi, 2016: 12).

Garba (2022: 59) states that Nigerian Constitution allows the provisions for Fundamental Human Rights in all its ramifications to avoid problems that may arise on the basis of ethnicity and religious minority in Nigeria. The essence of this provision is to disallow the majority domination of minority on the basis of ethnicity or religion, including forceful imposition of one's religion on other religion. He opines that Nigeria's Constitution states that no person or group of persons has the right to adopt any religion as the official religion of the nation or state. The citizens of Nigeria are expected to exercise the freedom of religion in accordance with the supremacy of the Constitution.

4.1 Limitations to freedom of Religion

The following are some of the limitations to the freedom of religion in Nigeria

1. Some government policies are hypocritically formulated to check social tension such as the requirement by religious groups or denomination to secure permit before embarking on public religious functions outside their places of worship
2. The Nigerian government is not interested in addressing the problems associated with religious diversity and coexistence, and other related religious freedom. This made the United States of America Commission on International Religious Freedom to declare Nigeria as the worst country in the religious freedom in the World in April, 2010 (Ottuh 2015: 21).
3. The restriction of freedom of religion may be imposed by law of Nigeria. Certain aspects of the law are restricted to the legislations of the States Houses of Assembly and Federal Parliament. The restriction could be on public interest such as public order, security, health, morality, the rights of



others, and peace and order; and defense such as security which includes the issue of Kidnapping, Terrorism, Boko Haram, Territorial security, economy, monetary, energy, environmental, military, Political independence and all other national resources (Ezeanokwasa 2016: 61-66).

4. Although there is no official declaration of any religion as national or state religion, but the adherents of the religious group at the helm of affairs are not ready to embark in the use of law against their members who contravene the freedom of religion. In this case, the supremacy of the law on religious matter is violated. This is common to the state where certain religion is predominant (Garba 2020: 59).

5. Involvement of religion in Nigeria politics

Religion is very important in Nigerian politics as far as the country is concern. Before the advent of the colonial era, both Muslims and Christians have been running the affairs of the country as separate entities. The Muslims were the leaders of the Northern Territory while the Christians were the leaders in the Southern Territory during the colonial era. When the British handed over power to Nigerians in 1960, the Muslims dominate the Northern Nigeria politics and Christians dominate the Southern Nigeria politics. This has been the politics in Nigeria for many years. A lot of reasons according to Falola (2009: 1-3) could be adduced for the domination of the Nigerian politics by Islam. These include

1. Population of the Muslims and geopolitical division of the country. Nigeria was divided into six zones. Three from the North and three from the South. The Muslims in the South are more than Christians in the North. Hence better chance for more Muslims to hold power at the Federal level than the Christians.
2. The Federal and State governments failure to encourage rapid development to improve the standard of living of the indigenes and non-indigenes living in Nigeria. This has made many Muslims living in the country to resort to Islam as alternative ideology to seek for solution to their problems with the consolation that what are happening are the Will of Allah (God).
3. Tensions mount in the country in various forms. These include economy, political, socio-cultural, and inter and intra religious crises. The most prevalent now are security, and unemployment or underemployment. Many of the Muslims that fall to the above categories of people opine that it will be better one day.
4. National and international solidarity. Islam cuts across the length and breadth of the World. Their unity is indivisible. Any action taken against a Muslim or group a Muslims may have devastating effect on such a country. Hence the need for the political gladiators to trend with caution. Muslim leaders in different Muslim organizations or body may influence their followers against the government to reject any action taken against any Muslim or a group of Muslims in totality. It may even lead to the failure of such a candidate or party in the subsequent election
5. Political actors do win election or consolidate their positions through the influence of Islam and Christianity.
6. The south is afraid of Islam and the North because the Northerners are mostly Muslims and a serious determinant of the Nigeria politics, especially in the selection of president, vice president and parties' executives. It is the assertion of the Northerners that the East controls the trade; the West controls the civil service; and the North the political power.

5.1 Factors that make religion powerful in the Nigerian politics

A lot of factors are responsible to the domination or attempt to dominate the Nigeria politics by either of the dominant religions in Nigeria-Islam and Christianity (Falola 2009: 3). Among these factors are:

1. Failure of the political leadership. Many people that had head or are heading the political affairs in Nigeria have failed the country. The electorates have tested both Muslims and Christians as



president and vice president and failed. Where the president is a Muslim, his vice president will be a Christian and vice-versa. This system does not auger well to the electorates because they believe that they have not done the best to the country. It is the belief of each denomination that when its members are at the helm of affairs, they will get unrestricted access to him or her and use the position to assist their denomination. The same thing is applicable to both the states and local government authorities.

2. The failure of the institutions and structures of governance at all levels. It is the belief of the people that the national parliament is not performing to their expectation. The same thing is applicable to the states houses of Assembly and local governments' ones. The civil service and other government agencies and parastatals are not left out.
3. The different adjustment programs of both the Federal and state governments have not yielded positive results. The money allotted to each of the programs fall to the wrong hands.
4. The economic decline at the local government, states, national and international levels is another major problem.
5. The adherents see religion as a source of mobilization for political power. Once a candidate of a political party that is contesting for a particular position is a Muslim and the candidate contesting for the same position from the other party is a Christian, religious dogmatism sets in. In the northern Nigeria, many people use Islam to get to power. In the South, a lot of contestants used Christianity to get to power. In a nutshell, there is rivalry among the Muslims and Christians to produce the next president of Nigeria. In fact, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) wants the status quo to remain. The production of Muslim-Muslim ticket by All Progressive Congress (APC), for 2023 general election for president and vice president was vehemently rejected by CAN. This is a negative policy against freedom of religion in Nigeria. Added to this is winning of primary elections of the three major political parties in Nigeria-APC, PDP and Labor Party. That of the APC was won by Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu who is a Yoruba man. Atiku Abubakar from the northern region became that of PDP while that of Labor Party was won by Peter Obi from eastern Nigeria. Apart from religion which is universal, the politics of Nigeria is being regionalized on the basis of ethnicity.

5.2 Negative effects of religion on the Nigerian politics

Some of the negative effects of religion on the Nigerian politics as deduced from Falola (2009: 2), and Nwankwo (2019: 2) include the followings:

1. Ethnicity. This has been the contending issue between Northern and Southern Nigerian politics. The Northern is occupied majorly by the Muslims while most of the people living in the Southern Nigeria are Christians. This makes some political thinkers to suggest zoning system between North and South for Federal political position. Once a Northerner becomes the president, the Southerner is recommended to succeed him likewise the vice president. This may not allow the credible candidate to emerge.
2. Religious plurality. There are two major religions in Nigeria-Islam and Christianity. Most of the past Nigerian presidents were Muslims. The Christians want a situation whereby a Muslim will be succeeded by a Christian and vice-versa, or the president will be a Muslim and his vice will be a Christian or vice versa. If religious denomination or sect is introduced to selection process, there may not be rapid development in Nigeria.
3. Competition between Islam and Christianity. The two most influential religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity, are competing for space, converts and political domination. These are being championed by the religious leaders. Example is the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).
4. Division of religions to many denominations and sects. In Islam, there are many religious groups, factions and sects. Christianity is not left out in this division. The effect of this is that there is no unity among them except when they are fighting on a matter regarding as common purpose. The



disunity among the religious denominations, groups, factions or sects will retard the progress of politics in Nigeria.

5. Electoral malpractice. This include vote buying, violence, rigging of election in favour of one's religious adherent and voting apathy by some religious faithfuls are means of selecting majority in minority. These may not allow the best contender to be elected

6. Findings

In the course of writing this paper many discoveries were made with respect to the role of Islam in resolving the crisis in the Nigerian politics. Such findings include the followings:

1. Nigeria is a country with large population of both Muslims and Christians spreading across the length and breadth of the country. The Muslims forms majority in the north while the Christians forms majority in the south. The rivalry between the two groups to produce the Nigerian president is a problem for the Nigerian politics.
2. Politics is multidimensional. Some people are using religion to get support and power. This is common to the Muslims in the northern Nigeria and the Christians in the southern Nigeria
3. Religious leaders want their denomination to be in power to get unrestricted as to political power.
4. Religion functions positively if its injunctions are adhered to. Its negative use divides the Nigerian politics.
5. The freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Nigeria Constitution. Its practice is limited by a lot of factors which include public interest and security.
6. Nigerians resort to religion because of multidimensional issues. One of such issues is the failure of the successive Nigeria administrators to proffer satisfactory solutions to the problems of the country.
7. Ethnicity is being used in the negative way to get support and access to power.

7. Recommendations

In the light of our findings during the course of this article, the following recommendations are made:

1. Islam and Christianity adherents in Nigeria should eschew rivalry on appointment and election of their members to political positions. They should vote on the bases of capability and merit of a given candidate. If this is done there will be rapid development in Nigeria.
2. Using of religion to get support and power should be resisted. Anybody who uses religion to campaign should not be voted for.
3. The attempt by any religious leader to plant its adherent to the position of authority irrespective of the character and capability of the given candidate should be rejected.
4. No religion preaches violence. The candidates, on their assumption of authority, should imbibe the principles of justice, fair play, equality and other positive religious injunctions. They should understand that they are going to account for their actions on the Day of Judgment.
5. They political gladiators should desist from using religion to divide Nigeria. They should remember that no religion preaches violent. Nobody can fight for a given Prophet of God. The attempt to divide Nigeria on the bases of Islam and Christianity will slow the growth of the country.
6. The political leaders and followers should shun negative use of the freedom of religion. The attack of one religion by the other using political undertone should be rejected. Slander, violence, unhealthy campaign and destruction of life and property are anti-religious activities which religion frowns at.



7. Resorting to ethnicity for political campaign is anti-religion. Islam preaches equality of every human being irrespective of race, color, religion and political affiliation. Ethnicity is only a geographical division which has no place in Islam.

8. Conclusion

Nigeria as a country cannot do away with religion and politics. The close merging between Islam and Christianity in the country is being used negatively by the political leaders. This has resulted to a lot of negative utterances especially during the primary elections, political campaigns and general elections. The perception of religion by our political leaders is mostly negative. Many of them do not practice religion in accordance with their religious dictate. The freedom of religion is being used negatively in the country. The failure of our political leaders and institutions, and economic hardship in the country contribute greatly to the Nigerian problems. If the principles of religion can be adhered to, the economic and political problems in the country will be eradicated or minimized.

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