



Politics of Religion in Nigeria since 1999

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Abstract

Two major religions alongside others are practiced in Nigeria, namely Islam and Christianity. Religious politics is fast becoming the order in the country's political activities. Religion has been a strong determining factor for governance bureaucracy and the electoral process in Nigeria. Hence, the impacts of religion politics in Nigeria could be both positive and negative. This paper focuses on the positive and negative influences of religion on politics since the inception of the democratic government in Nigeria in 1999. Historical analysis method was embarked upon to access facts and authentic information. Findings show that politics of religion is detrimentally pronounced in Nigeria political activities. The research recommends ways of harmonizing the political interests of the two major religions for national development. The adherents of both major religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity, should seek the common good for peaceful co-existence and serene political atmosphere. In conclusion, there must be mutual understanding and common goal in the governance of the nation. Nigeria politicians and clerics should desist from the use of religion platforms to promote personal political interest. They should not be agents of disharmony in Nigeria.

Keywords: Politics, Religion, Nigeria, Muslim and Christianity

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a secular state as enshrined in the country constitution. As a multi-ethnicity and secular society, the citizens enjoy freedom of worship. It is glaring from the records of previously conducted census that Nigeria is predominantly Christians and Muslims. There are other traditional religions in Nigeria but most are not duly recognized as the two major dominant religions earlier mentioned. It should be noted that religion and politics is strongly becoming indivisible for the adherents in political realms. The challenge of political leaders galvanizing supports for their faiths and co-adherents is a major factor that is polarizing the Nation. The impact of religion over the socio-cultural relationship is strongly pronounced in the governance activities.

2. Impacts of Politics of Religion in Nigeria

Politics of religion in Nigeria has led especially Christians and Muslims to continually engage in rivalry of fifth columnist, as such many incompetent leaders were produced who jucily rode on the platform of politics of religion to assume political offices. Segun Gbadegesin expressed that, "Of all vocations, politics is the most consequential for human well-being. It sets the norms and standards for others in light of their bearing on human well-being. It also establishes the principles and standards of distributive and penal justice so there is peace and security in the political community. Politics is the architectonic. And to that extent, it is the most noble vocation."¹ Due to the awareness of the liberating power in politics, religion is therefore seen as tool in the hands of several greedy individuals to achieve their political ambitions since 1999 in Nigeria.

¹ Segun Gbadegesin, "Of Politics and Politicians," *The Nation*, September 9, 2022.



Politics of religion has posed threat to national unity, progress and development of Nigeria. The 2023 national election in Nigeria is fast approaching. Some political parties settled for Muslims/Christians, and Christians/Muslims candidacy for political offices in all tears of the governance. Politics of religion has made Nigerians to be aware that one out of all the registered political parties in Nigeria; All Progressive Congress (APC) has settled for Muslim/Muslim ticket for her presidential candidates. This is not the first time Nigeria will have a Political Party with Muslim/Muslim Ticket, the candidacy of MKO Abiola and Babagana Kingibe of Social Democratic Party (SDP) during 1993 election was Muslim/Muslim Ticket and nobody raise any objection. But Religion, ethnicity and money are very strong factors that influence Nigerian politics today, this study focused only politics of religion.

3. Politics of Religion in the New Dawn of Democracy

Religion has played significant roles in Nigeria politics since the inception of Nigeria as a republic from her independence in 1st October, 1960. This paper only considered the religious influences on Nigeria politics since 1999. Shortly after the historic transition to democratic regime in 1999, politics of religion became more pronounced in Nigeria democracy. The first news that brought Nigerian politics to the religion limelight was the introduction of sharia, Governor Ahmed Yerima introduced the Sharia Islamic legal system in Zamfara State in October 1999. Yerima earned widespread supports and acceptance from the people of Zamfara and Muslims all over the Nation for his promise to implement Sharia as a major strategy to address widespread societal decadence in Zamfara State. Islamic clerics effectively mobilized for Yerima and further legitimated his government given the Sharia factor, and they were also well recognized by the regime and integrated into strategic aspects of the state's public service. Chanting of Allahu Akbar (God is Great) were most popular at major political rallies in the state, all these successfully gave an Islamic coloration to the regime.

Christians saw the drive towards the implementation of Sharia by the northern states as a clear-cut political strategy by the Hausa Muslims to destabilize the regime of a 'born-again' Christian President-Olusegun Obasanjo. For instance, Archbishop Ola Makinde, the then Chairman of the Abuja chapter of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) said, "Part of the aim of the introduction of the political Sharia in Nigeria is to prevent or crush the spread of Christianity in the North. Another aim is to pull down the government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo which the political Sharia apostles see as a government headed by an infidel."²

This particularly came on the heels of the Christian identity Obasanjo exhibited immediately after his release from prison following some years in the political imprisonment of the erstwhile Nigerian head of state, General Sani Abacha. He was well received by the Christian community as a 'born-again evangelical'. Obasanjo was further seen as a 'virtual messiah' that had come through a divine plan to be the chosen candidate of the Christians who felt since 1979 been sidelined from occupying the office of presidency, except for the 84 days interim regime of Ernest Shonekan. In addition, Obasanjo widely opened the doors of the Presidential Villa, the Aso Rock, to Christian leaders to pray for Nigeria and also built a Christian Chapel in the Villa.

Similarly, this was also the case with Ibrahim Shekarau of Kano state of the same political party with Yerima. The Islamic clerics were observed to have played a prominent role in the emergence of Shekarau as the governor of the state and also in his government. They vigorously campaigned for him during the elections because of his agenda for Sharia and also headed major state agencies such as the Shura

² Tony Obiechina, "Nigeria: Sharia meant to stop Christianity, Scuttle Obasanjo's Government, says Makinde," The Post Express, July 25, 2001.



Committee, Zakat and Husbi Commission and the Hisbah board established in the spirit of Sharia after his emergence as the governor of the state between 2003 and 2011.³

Sharia-crazy soon generated a widespread uproar across the nation immediately after it assumed a northern policy following its adoption by 11 other states after Zamfara. Christians in the North suspected the move as another attempt by the Muslim majority to finally silence their voice in the scheme of affairs. Christians were therefore strongly opposed to the move and all its denominations across the country organized a series of sensitization programs on the implications of the new regime of Sharia to the Christian worshippers in various churches. This created an effective avenue to mobilize Christians against the program. For instance, the CAN made announcements to all churches in Kaduna for a mass protest after the state government under the leadership of Ahmad Makarfi adopted the Sharia system in 2000.⁴

His major defense policy upon assumption into office was also enough to generate much suspicion from the Muslim community. Obasanjo restructured the Nation's Armed Forces in such a way that the Muslim Hausa-Fulani top military officers who had hitherto dominated the defense cum power segment of the nation since the 1960s were systematically edged out in favor of the Christians. The Muslim elites in the North therefore felt insecure with this restructuring 'which in turn leads to an almost reflexive adoption of 'tribe' mentality'.

However, when it was becoming clear that the pendulum of power was again swinging to the side of the North, the heightened tension of Sharia sharply reduced. But when the winds of change altered, Obasanjo was among the first individuals to publicly announce the 'death' of Sharia in the North. At the end of his regime in 2007, he told a congregation of Christians at an annual event that he warned the Sharia actors in the North that: If this kind of Sharia was from God, it will survive but that if it was politically motivated it will fizzle out. Truly, by 2007, when Umar Musa Yaradua of the North emerged as the President, political Sharia had died a 'natural death' in most of the states that embraced it, except for Kano.

The case of Kano is particularly different because of the background of the governor who was a Muslim cleric. Hence, Shekarau, the governor of the state, vigorously and outstandingly pursued Sharia to address moral and developmental challenges in the state via the establishment of the Zakah Commission and Hisbah Board. The Zakah Commission being an agency responsible for the collection of tax from the rich as stipulated in the religion of Islam, had a broad program for poverty alleviation.

This includes the provision of medical assistance, working capital to local entrepreneurs, vocational training to the unemployed youths, and assistance to the aged. The Hisbah Board as an Islamic paramilitary agency of the state works with government and the police to promote peace in the society. It also addressed the malaise of girl-child trafficking and marital crisis.⁵ However, Sharia still played a critical role in the politics of Zamfara state at the end of Yerirna's administration in 2007. His successor, Aliyu Shinkafi, who decamped to the People Democratic Party (PDP) during his reign and clashed with Yerirna, was totally rejected in the 2011 elections mostly for his poor implementation of Sharia. As a result, the new governor of the state, Abubakar Yari Abdul-Aziz, displaced the incumbent in the governorship elections due to his alliance with Yerirna and his promise for the re-introduction of Sharia.

Politics of religion again featured prominently in the political process that informed the emergence of the circumstantial presidency of Goodluck Jonathan in 2010 and the general elections that followed in April 2011. It began with the failed attempt of Olusegun Obasanjo to unconstitutionally prolong his regime

³ Abdulfatah Olajide, "Nigeria: Shekarau vows to strengthen Sharia in Kano," *Daily Trust*, July 22, 2003.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Abba Anwar, "Kano Hisbah Board: Prospects and Problems," *Daily Triumph*, November 4, 2004, p.16.



in a process dubbed the ‘third term agenda’ in 2006. As a result, Obasanjo was left with no choice than to quickly arrange for a successor that would better protect the legacies of his regime.

Taking into consideration a ‘gentleman’ agreement of power rotation between the North and South in his party - the PDP, his best choice was a relatively corrupt-free and disciplined northern Muslim - Umar Musa Yaradua - who had successfully served as a two-term governor in Katsina State. In an election categorized as the most controversial in the political history of Nigeria, Yaradua emerged as the President of the country in April 2007.⁶ Yaradua was ill, a patient of acute heart disease-pericarditis, he was unable to hold onto power and effectively running his government. This gave his closest aides otherwise known as the ‘Cabal’ (mostly from the North) the ample advantage to wield much influence during his regime. Given the eventual intensity of his illness and the reluctance of his influential aides to hand over power to a Christian from the South, a Saudi Arabian hospital was strategically chosen as a secret presidential residence. This arrangement actually worked out as planned as the Saudi Arabian authorities on religious solidarity proved supportive of Yaradua and his government in his last days while receiving treatment at the hospital despite series of local and international pressures on Riyadh.

At the heat of this tension, the Save Nigeria Group, a civil society group under the headship of a Lagos-based Pentecostal Pastor, Tunde Bakare, was at the Centre of an intense protest directed at the parliament to terminate the reign of dying Yaradua and declare Jonathan as the President. It is also noteworthy that only some selected religious leaders were allowed to see the ailing President, apart from his closest aides upon his return to the country. Hence, the Imams were given special privilege to see him and inform the public about his state of health, and it was only after the Christian community raised objection to this special privilege that some of their representatives were permitted to visit and pray for him. And later, at the declaration of Jonathan as the President of Nigeria, given the death of Yaradua in May 2010, the relief and applaud from the Christian community was quite obvious. For instance, Reverend Matthew Kuka, a prominent Christian cleric in Nigeria, was among the first individuals that read religious meanings to the process that produced the presidency of Jonathan. He prophesized that it was a ‘monumental act of divine epiphany’ and ‘this man’s (Goodluck Jonathan) rise has defied logic and anyone who attempts to explain it is tempting the gods. Already irked by this development, it also became an open affront on the Hausa-Fulani Muslims when Jonathan with the strong backing of Obasanjo and other influential southerners declared to run for presidency under the platform of PDP in the 2011 election.

To the Hausa-Fulani northerners, it was a complete violation of an existing ‘zoning formula’ which was supposed to be in favor of the North, because Yaradua was unable to complete his two-term regime while Obasanjo, had an uninterrupted two-term presidency between 1999 and 2007. This controversy heated the polity particularly in the build-up to the PDP presidential primaries. Thus, the North teamed up under the platform of the Northern Elders Political Forum (NPLF) to produce a ‘Northern Consensus Candidate’ in order to neutralize the chances of Jonathan as the incumbent in the primaries.

They relied on this strategy to create the best opportunity for the emergence of a northern candidate under the platform of PDP for the presidential election. Their outright loss to Jonathan at the PDP primaries following the poor outing of Atiku Abubakar as the ‘Consensus Candidate’ at the event therefore required a new scheming; the shopping for an alternative northern candidate outside the PDP. Their choice was General Muhammad Buhari, a former Head of State, notable for political discipline and zero-tolerance for corruption in the nation, Muhammad Buhari, who had earlier openly supported the Sharia cause, had been tagged a Muslim fanatic by many, ‘especially the Christians. The political party he successfully floated for his presidential ambition after leaving the ANPP over unsettled ideological conflict, the Congress for

⁶ Rotimi Suberu, “Nigeria’s muddled election,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007); 95-110.



Progressive Change (CPC), was also categorized as an Islamic northern party. This is particularly against the backdrop of the nature of supporters it attracted and the spread of the party which had more presence in the North and almost none in the South. CPC enjoyed the patronage of the Muslim masses, almajiri students and Muslim clerics in the North who gave Buhari the epithet, Mai Gaskiya (the truthful one) as a mark of their high level of trust in him. Realizing his slim chances in the presidential race given the general perception of him being a Muslim fanatic, Buhari devised a pragmatic strategy of opening up to the Christian community by specially selecting Pastor Bakare as his running mate and on several occasions, paid official visits to influential Nigerian pastors.

Despite this attempt towards constructing a new identity for himself, Buhari could not be detached from his strong Islamic background going by the popularity and patronage he enjoyed from the Islamic institutions that were effectively explored to garner as much as possible votes for him. In what seems like a confirmation of the foregoing, Kanti Bello, a notable PDP stalwart, stated that the CPC adopted a strategy that ‘relied on religion as a weapon of campaign. The CPC used the Council of Ulama (Muslim clerics) in the North to campaign for Buhari, which portrayed him as a candidate of Muslims’.⁷ It is further reported that Jonathan’s supporters in the Muslim North despite being Muslims were considered working against the interest of Islam and enemies of the North given their affiliation with Jonathan’s PDP.

Jonathan was also not far from the church for support and mobilization for his presidential ambition. The most visible and much debated of this was his visit to the Pentecostal’s Redeemed Christian Church of God in December 2010, where he knelt down before the Church’s popular pastor, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, in the open glare for his prayers to succeed in the elections. Choosing that particular event to openly show his good relationship with the Christians is quite instructive. The event labelled the ‘Holy Ghost Night’ made the 2010 episode of an annual gathering of millions of Christians from all parts of the country as a program of the Redeemed church to usher in a blessed new year.

In the same vein, a notable Pentecostal pastor, Paul Adefarasin of the House on the Rock Church in Lagos, was reported to have impressed it upon his followers that the political system had for long been dominated by the Muslims and there was the need for them to go all out for a Christian presidential candidate in the 2011 elections. The PM News reported thus: Adefarasin said that the polity has been Islamized for so long and Christians must wake up and pray against it. ‘Nigerians used to be the most educated people in the world until the likes of Abacha and Muritala Muhammed came and scattered our educational system to slow down the South so that the North can catch up, instead of speeding up the north.’⁸

Hence, the 2011 elections appeared to be a political battle between the Muslims and the Christians as Jonathan and Buhari signified the major contenders of the presidential elections. The outcome of the elections clearly confirms this observation. The votes reflected a voting pattern significantly determined by religion and ethnicity. Jonathan had a landslide victory in the Christian dominated areas of the South and also the Christian areas of the North otherwise known as the Middle-Belt region. This guaranteed him a landslide victory after winning 23 states in the country and polling 22, 495, 187 votes. He was rejected outright in the Muslim’s ‘Core North’ where Buhari swept all the votes in its 12 states including Sokoto, Zamfara, Niger, Kano, Kebbi, Katsina, Bauchi, Kaduna, Jigawa, Borno, Gombe and Yobe.⁹ The intense violence that followed this development shall be discussed below. But’ it must be mentioned that there have

⁷ Sahabi Yahaya, “Ex-Nigeria strongman shows election muscle in North,” Reuters, March 2, 2011.

⁸ Hakeem Onapajo, “Politics for God: Religion, Politics and Conflicts in Democratic Nigeria,” *The Journal of Pan Africa Studies*, Vol.4, no. 9, January 2012.

⁹ Ibid.



been allegations and counter-allegations from both parties that massive rigging was perpetrated in favour of each of these two candidates in the regions that signify their support base given the religious and ethnic sentiments they enjoyed in these places. The CPC alleges in its petition to the Presidential Election Tribunal that the election was clearly rigged in 20 states mostly in the South in favour of Jonathan. On the other hand, the PDP also forwarded the argument that there was widespread electoral fraud especially ‘underage voting and religious intimidation’ in the Muslim North in favour of Buhari.

4. Regional Religions Affiliations

As earlier mentioned, religious affiliation in Nigeria is strongly related to ethnicity with rather distinct regional divisions between ethnic groups. The northern states dominated by the Hausa and Fulani groups are predominantly Muslim while the southern ethnic groups have a large number of Christians. In the southwest there are no predominant religions. The Yoruba tribe which is the majority ethnic group in the southwest practices Christianity, Muslim and or the traditional Yoruba religion which centers on the belief in one Supreme God and several lesser deities. Many people include elements of traditional beliefs in their own practice of Christianity or Islam. The Christian community is composed of Roman Catholics (the largest denomination), Methodists, Anglicans, Baptist, Presbyterians, and members of Evangelical and Pentecostal groups.¹⁰

5. Conclusion

Religion is present in all dimension of human life, especially in Nigeria. It is so central that one may conclude that religion is life and life is religion in Nigeria. Just like any other African nation, Nigerians are so religious. Therefore, human life is possible only in a social and political setting. “Therefore, religious value occurs only in society which is a network of relationship in which human beings of all ages and both sexes live in groups and members of these groups share their respective cultures”.¹¹ The relationship between religion and politics is evident in this study, given that, both religion and politics pertain to human life, then the need for peaceful co-existence and the need for authority and power is essential. Oderinde has adequately demonstrated the interrelationship between religion, society and authority when he says:

Religion is related to society in several ways. Religion exists and it is practiced in society. As individual seeks for protection from their society, so also the adherents seek for protection from their religion. Both religion and society aim at satisfying man's physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual needs. All societies believe in supernatural beings and a supernatural life. These beliefs have effects on the lives of the people who are living. In both religion and society, there is an exercise of authority and power. Both religion and society have code of conduct for their members, religious institutions formulate doctrines, ethics, values and roles, which are integrated in the life of wider society.¹²

Oderinde's observation of the mutual relationship between religion, society and human being has involved ethical dimensions, thus the coloration of our politics. Moreover, since the Nigeria politicians in particular and human kind in general express their religion in virtually all segments of life, their value, ethics and moral are informed by their religious convictions. In this regard, wisdom dictates that we listen to one another. It should be what religion forbids that the society forbids in politics and the society approves

¹⁰Above data is not currently acceptable in the light of the recently conducted census of 2009.

¹¹ J. T. Oderinde. *Introduction to Sociology of Religion*. Ilorin: Delma and Sons Press, 2004.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.



what religion approved in politics. Religious values are the same as moral values and there are no separate instructions for either as virtually the whole society is involved in the task of inculcating sound moral and religious values in the younger generation to ensure a healthy and disciplined society.¹³

Religion in Nigeria today has been devilled with politics of religious intolerance and disharmony culminating in wanton destruction of lives and property. For example, the religious clash between Christians and Muslims on October, 2001 as reported by Daily Times claimed more than 200 lives, apart from property worth billions of naira destroyed in the crises.¹⁴ Buttressing this further Oderinde cited Dr. Lateef Adegbite, the Secretary- General of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs declares in the Daily Times of October 1, 2001 that Nigeria has experienced in recent years, an excess of disharmony arising from religious and ethnic difference across the nation. Hardly has any area been spared in this regard.¹⁵

6. Recommendations

Since Christians and Muslims are no longer seen to be enjoying security and protection in Nigeria and Nigeria is not a Muslim or Christian State, there should be rights and freedom for every individual in the country to practice the religion of his/her own interest; as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution (Fundamental Human Right for every citizenry in the country) freedom conscience.

1. Since there is constitution and bye-Law of the nation, then the Government should adhere to the constitution by following it to deal with the criminals. Whosoever kills in the name of religion should be arrested and prosecuted so far, every individual is having freedom to life.
2. The fact is that there are some Islamic and Christian leaders aiding and sponsoring the religious crisis in Nigeria, such people should be arrested and be decisively dealt with.
3. The Government should also release the pilgrimage organization to the religious organization so that the Government will only focus on creating a peaceful and orderly environment that promotes religious harmony. Politicians should stop using religion as a tool to achieve their personal political interest.
4. The Christians and Muslims are to stand firm by their faith and maintain their solidarity with their brethren throughout the country; they are to live in peace and harmony with every individual citizen. They also need to be defending their nation not on the basis of their faith at any time.
5. The Government should declare State of emergency in any state that the terrorists are fomenting trouble, in order to allow peace to reign where it has the tendencies of causing religious disharmony

¹³Ibid

¹⁴Dime, C.A. "African Religion and the Quest for Ethical Revolution," Religion and Ethics in Nigeria edited by Abogunrin. Ibadan, Daystar Press, 2019.

¹⁵ Oderinde. Sociology of Religion. 38.



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