

Religious Impact on Political Activities: The Nigerian Experience.

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Abstract

Religion wields a lot of power in most human societies, making religious leaders highly influential in the state of affairs. Nigeria, though a multi-cultural and multi-religious country, is deeply influenced by religion and culture which directly and indirectly control the political sphere among other aspects of national relevance. The claim of superiority and dominance has served as the foundation for religious intolerance and several socio-religious crises and violence that have bedeviled Nigeria since independence. Though, sometimes concealed in political garment, the fall out of the misuse of religion is usually motivated by religious bigotry. Using systematic review of literature, the objective of this paper is to examine the historical background of religion in Nigeria's polity, and examine the activism of the two religions in seeking socio-political interventions in Nigeria's political activities and electioneering. The paper adopts the historical and analytical research methods to examine upheld religious perceptions and beliefs that are significant determinants of socio-political participation in Nigeria. The paper also seeks to address how the Nigerian political system has somewhat benefitted and also suffered setbacks from the activities of religious leaders, through the mis/use of power, ethnicity and nepotism which have been exploited by the political elites. This is with a view to critiquing,

the roles of religious leaders in Nigeria wearing the garbs of political activists.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Nigeria, Election, Political Activism.

Introduction

Religion has always played a key role in influencing the sociopolitical beliefs of many societies. In truth, the holy nature of government shaped and affected the majority of the world's nations. In fact, history shows that monarchy is upheld and regulated by religion in different parts of the world. Using Nigeria as an example, it is evident that monarchy was upheld and regulated by religion over the years. In the word of Lefebure, who argues as follows, "the concept of the Divine Right of Kings, which originated in the theocratic paradigm of governance, bestowed unlimited power and authority on the King or Monarch, who was regarded as a direct representative of God" (Lefebure, 2011: 11).

It is also believed that the Monarch was supreme and only accountable to God. This concept is abundant in ancient history. For example, in Christianity, the Pope has long been seen as the Preacher of Jesus on Earth, with an eventual consultant over the Ecclesiastical and, ramblingly, the Municipal, according to his divine right (Lefebure, 2011: 11).

On the other hand, Islam held the Caliphs (shortest progenies and replacements of the Holy Prophet Muhammad) to be the utmost cream of the crop of

Islamic society. Islamic states were theocratic under Prophet Muhammad, with Sharia serving as both Islam's religious and moral practicalities and the commandment of the realm. The Caliphs were regarded as secular as well as religious leaders. They were not sanctioned to encourage dogmas because it was believed that Muhammad had completed the disclosure of the faith. However, as legislatures of Allah and direct offspring of The Holy Prophet, the Caliphs were to impose Sharia as the people's religious and moral norms. Because they were representative of Allah, their powers extended beyond secular substances to divine issues as well. On this note, Prophet Muhammad proposed that the Muslim municipal select a replacement or Caliph by negotiation to head the theocratic process of headship to personify the earthly kingdom under divine rule. Islamic States today therefore attempt to apply Islamic laws in every detail in whatever society they find themselves to build an Islamic culture, as seen all over the Central Middle East. Politics, on the other hand, is a fight for power, resource regulation, and influence at numerous levels, whereas political mobilization refers to the processes of preparing and establishing people for political engagements such as voting, lobbying, manipulating others to vote, and so on. Harold Dwight Laswell defined politics as "who gets what, when, and how" (Laswell, 2014, 1). Laswell's explanation assumes that political actors will use any means at their disposal to advance their political agenda, which typically includes but **not** limited to ascending the political ladder and remaining at the helm of affairs in their countries and constituencies' decision-making institutions. Using Nigeria as a case study, this research aims to comprehend the role of religion as a political mobilization tool. How does religion impact political decisions, and what are the repercussions of incorporating religion into politics?

Beforehand, it is necessary to first present a framework of some of Nigeria's foremost religions. Thus, Apuwabi argues that:

It is on record that Nigeria is home to three major faiths. Traditional African Beliefs system (Afrel), Islam, and Christianity are

examples of the dominant religion in Nigeria. Though, Nigeria with a population of over 170 million, the record has it that Islam is estimated covers to constitute 50% of the Nigerian population, Christianity on the other hand covers over 40%, while the practice of Traditional African Religions occupies 10% of the Nigerian religious chats. This estimate, excludes Eastern practitioners of alternative religious philosophies (Apuwabi, 2018: 324).

Islam and Christianity have been disseminated since pre-colonial times. Islam had already made significant inroads into the territory that became known as Nigeria in the seventh century. Following Apuwabi's position above, Suberu & Bekoe opine [as follows: Later decades saw the northern areas, traditionally home to the Hausa ethnic group, fall under the dominance of the Fulani, who were determined to impose a true Islamic social order. The Fulani created the Caliphate of Sokoto in 1830 and continued to build an Islamic political, social, and religious order throughout the northern territories (Suberu & Bekoe, 2008: 1).

Thus, while Islam arrived in Nigeria from the Arab trans-desert trade through Sokoto, Kebbi, and Maiduguri in the far north, Christianity on the other hand arrived from the far south Calabar. The first announcement of Christianity in Nigeria came around the 15th century as a result of the influence of Catholic priests who ministered to the Portuguese commercial population along West Africa's coast. However, Lefebure argues that "with the advent of Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian missionaries from Britain, Europe, and North America in the nineteenth century, Christianity commenced to make inroads into southern Nigeria". (Lefebure, 2011: 20). With a plethora of churches and Islamic organizations in Nigeria, religion has elongated and played an important role in the country's political life. Religion has been and continues to be a vital constituent of political deployment in Nigeria, from the expatriate day when the British used Islamic leaders as an apparatus for

their unintended management of Northern Nigeria to the current religious rhetoric used by politicians, particularly during campaigns. Using Laswell's definition as a guide, one might conclude that religion has been extensively employed by national, regional, and state actors to fuel their political goals in Nigeria. This is especially evident when we consider that Nigeria is a deeply religious country. According to (Onapajo, 2015: 15 & Forbes, 2015: 20), in one point agree that studies conducted by the Pew Research Centre, BBC, and Forbes show that Nigerians are some of the most religious people around the world, with five of their pastors emerging as the richest in Africa, with net worths ranging from \$300 to USD 150 million. Based on the cited study, Nigerians are the ninth most religious persons on earth while 88 % of Nigerians are influenced by religion (Forbes, 2015: 20)

In Nigeria, people are conscious of the dawn of a day when they are roused from their sleep as the speakers of a mosque call for morning prayers or the bells of a church announce morning masses or services as the case may be, rather than the ticking of their clocks. In this setting, it is easy to conclude that religion is a determinant whose power cannot be ignored. According to (Fox & Sandler (2003), religion has infiltrated politics through identity construction, political mobilization, and regime legitimacy. Naturally, the incorporation of religion and politics has resulted in a slew of concerts that have influenced the country's history.

Nexus between Religion and Politics

The relationship between religion and politics has always been intriguing and contentious. While some scholars (Kukah, 2012: 12; Onapajo, 2015: 12 & 15; Omelicheva & Ahmed, 2018: 18) claim that religion is an intrinsic aspect of politics and can be used to mobilize people, Stark and (Finke, 2010: 20) believe that religion should be kept separate from politics. Regardless of the sharp divide between experts on the importance of religion in politics, history is filled with examples of how religion has always played a key influence in people's political decisions. For example, in Christianity, Jesus Christ was persecuted from the inception of his ministry because he was

thought to be a King (political). Similarly, Jihads are utilized in Islam to overturn governments and political structures to establish Islamic caliphates. That is what Usman Dan Fodio did to the Northern Hausa Kingdoms of Nigeria in the 18th century to establish his Islamic Fulani rule. Today, it is believed that Boko Haram in Nigeria claims to be fighting a Jihad against the Nigerian state to build their caliphate. Without any doubt, it can be adduced that religion has an impact on political mobilization. Thus, religious leaders, as well as religious beliefs and belief systems, can influence people's political choices. Religious factors can impact political decisions such as registering for elections (as a candidate or an electorate), voting in elections, supporting political campaigns, and accepting political positions. According to Ellis and Haar (2004), "It is when religious belief motivates people to action that its relationship to politics becomes most evident" (Ellis & Haar, 2004: 3).

Onapajo, citing Huntington, contends that "religion is a vital component of state creation as well as international politics. Religion has been a crucial component of politics because it can mold people's worldviews, affect their thought patterns, guide state decisions, and serve as a barometer to measure political legitimacy" (Huntington, 2016: 19).

Thus, Religion, according to Usman and Imran, has a tremendous impact on human life since it influences individuals' behavioral patterns, particularly in developing countries. Using Pakistan as a case study, they concluded that "religion has a strong influence in shaping individuals' political attitudes and beliefs." It is one of the most important aspects of politics (Usman & Imran, 2019: 1). Religious organizations can mobilize resources useful for political participation even when members do not intend to enter politics. Religion can influence political engagement and mobilization, according to Djupe and Grant (2004), Voter turnout, campaign activity, contacting government officials, demonstrating, and participating in neighborhood politics are all examples of this. In the United States, for example, Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson, both former presidential candidates, have utilized their

religious channels to establish contacts with African politicians (Ellis & Haar, 2004: 5). Many people have lost faith in the government and its institutions. Because citizens lack trust in government institutions, many people turn to religion or faith-based organisations (FBOs) for help. Their beliefs are molded within these religious organizations, and a sense of civic obligation can be harnessed through the preaching and sermons of the pastors, priests, or Imams. According to Didonato: In truth, a person's religion may be replaced by political philosophy. A religious objective of loving one's neighbor, for example, may translate into secular political engagement, such as fighting for the impoverished, and a political activist may commit his life to the poor in the same manner that a person may dedicate himself to a religious group (Didonato, 2013: 1). Furthermore, religious clerics can affect political engagement by instructing their followers to participate in or boycott political activity. Some political leaders base their political choices and decisions on their religious beliefs or the advice of spiritual or religious guardians. This is evident when we analyze the abortion bill in Belgium in 1990. Following the sponsorship of an abortion bill in Belgium, the Bishops of Belgium warned their Catholic faithful of the dangers of distancing themselves from the ecclesiastical community by directly or indirectly supporting abortion. On this premise, the Belgian King, a fervent Catholic, informed the Prime Minister on March 30, 1990, that he would not sign the law without betraying his conscience. This is a clear example of how religion influences an individual's political choices. This example shows how religion can be used to mobilize people to support or oppose a certain political choice. In this light, a person who otherwise wishes to participate in politics may be discouraged by his religious leaders and group of believers. Evidently, researchers are divided on the role of religion as a political mobilization tool. While some think that religion should be insulated from politics, others think that religion is a serious imperative in political activities and mobilization.

Religion as a Political Mobilization Tool in Nigeria

Religion has always had a substantial impact on political participation in Nigeria. Indeed, religion has long been used as a political tool in Nigeria, with Muslims and Christians alike appealing to and condemning each other to win elections (Premack, 2015: 7). Two of the three major religions in Nigeria; Christianity and Islam can be used to show the asymmetric relationship between religion and politics. (Onapajo, (2015: 15) argues that religion has played a major role right from the early days of elections in Nigeria. This is more apparent in the northern part of the country, given the influential role religion plays in its social system.

Religion was a critical consideration in the configuration of the first political parties that emerged in 1950. The first Northern political parties were formed along religious grounds and religion was used as a rallying force to get followership. Usman & Imran, argue that:

The party's 'Islamic influence in winning mass support can hardly be underestimated' because the party itself was under the leadership of Muslim leaders including Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and founder of Jama'atu Nasril Islam and Sultan of Sokoto, the de-facto leader of Nigerian Muslims, who was the patron of the party (Usman & Imran, 2019: 143).

Usman and Imran further attest that the party was a community consensus and anyone that went contrary to what the party stood for was seen as an infidel and committing heresy. Little wonder therefore why the party had a huge following and won most of the elections at those initial stages.

Christianity, on the other hand, was initially isolated from politics, and early Christian Missionaries focused their efforts on building schools and opening hospitals, resulting in the emergence of a professional class of Nigerians in the country's south, where Christianity was more prevalent. However, with the entry of Islam into politics, particularly with

the founding of the Muslim League in 1949, there was worry within Christian circles about a projected imminent Muslim objective to Islamize Nigeria. As a result, since 1949, any political move from the Muslim north has been met with a counter-move from the Christian south, and questions of Islamization or Christianization of Nigeria have always provided a platform for both Christianity and Islam to galvanize their followers for political participation. Christianity's incursion into politics started in 1949 when "Christians of the Middle-Belt in the North, upon their increased perception of discrimination and gross dissatisfaction with the 'Islamic reign' of the NPC-led government under the leadership of Ahmadu Bello (an ardent of the 'One North, One People' agenda) mobilized themselves to challenge the rule" (Onapajo, 2015: 49). The first attempt by the Christians in this direction was the establishment of the Northern Nigerian Non-Muslim League following a motion raised in 1949 on the floor of the Northern House of Assembly for the restriction of the activities of the Christian missionaries (Omelicheva & Ranya, 2018, 18). (Omelicheva & Ranya, 2018: 18), posit that this league while relying on the unflinching support of the Christian missions in the country provided the template for the formation of the Middle Zone League (MZL) as a political party with its primary motive of resisting any northern Islamization agenda. In this setting, it became evident to Christians that the Northern elites had no intention of isolating Islam from politics. "As a result of this struggle for freedom within the Christian community, the Northern Christian Association was formed. Its goals were to protect and preserve the rights of Christians in the North. It is crucial to emphasize, of course, that this was consistent with the regional makeup of the time's politics (Kukah, 2012: 12). Some scholars (Onapajo, 2015: 12) have argued that Christianity further instigated political participation and reshaped the political landscape of Nigeria through military coups. While (Gumu & Tsiga, 2010: 4) alluded to the 1966 coup details being religiously motivated. Onapajo suggested that "the 1990 coup equally had religion as its underpinnings" (Onapajo, 2015: 15).

Abubakar Gumi in his autobiography echoed his position in the following words: "The plotters who carried out the January 1966 massacre should have had the courage at the time of the coup to admit their hatred for Islam as the real motive for their action. Thus, according to Usman & Imran quoting Abubakar Gumi: I was told afterward that they had originally included my name on the list of those to be assassinated together with the Sardauna [Ahmadu Bello]; they changed their mind because they could not agree on the explanation to give to the public since I was not a politician. Other leaders were more forthright later in celebrating the fact that Igbo land was the only place in the country 'not tainted' by Islam. (Usman & Imran, 2019: 123).

Okon (2008) argued that Muslims from the North accused the Christian Association of Nigeria to be the architects of the 1990 abortive Coup details and the then military President Ibrahim Babangida unofficially indicted the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and detained fifty nine of its members for a period of two months on account of the abortive coup.

Religious Activism as Used for Political Mobilization

Religious leaders, as well as religious beliefs and belief systems, can influence people's political choices. Religious factors can impact political decisions such as registering for elections (as a candidate or an electorate), voting in elections, supporting political campaigns, and accepting political positions. Various politico-religious methods in Nigeria fit into current narratives and are congruent with the available literature on religion and politics. Given the foregoing, some of the religious strategies which are consistent with existing literature on the debate of religion and politics are discussed below:

Campaigns and Electioneering: Religious leaders play important roles in sensitizing, educating, and persuading their followers to register and vote in elections. Election years in Nigeria are frequently preceded by months of civic theologies by both Christian clergy and Muslim imams, admonishing their followers on the importance of exercising their

civic responsibilities. Depending on who is speaking (whether a Muslim or a Christian), such civic obligations theologies are frequently intertwined with an emphasis by the preacher on whom they view to be a better candidate in the election. This is especially true in Nigerian presidential elections when the main contenders are typically a Muslim and a Christian. The trend has always been for Christian clergy to urge their flocks to vote for a Christian. An Imam, on the other hand, will promote the Muslim candidate to the Muslims. One example is sufficient. Amid the campaigns for the 2019 Presidential elections, Bishop David Oyedepo Senior, Pastor of Winner's Chapel Church, is cited as saying in one of his sermons, "We must wake up." We must awaken. 2019 must be a watershed moment for the church. We must awaken. We will not vote for someone who will kill us with our hands. We will not vote for people who place a higher value on cows than on human life. Get up. "To the wise, a word is enough" (Nwachukwu, 2019, 1).

Religious leaders running as Political Candidates:

Another method religion can be utilized as a weapon for political mobilization is for religious personalities to run for office as candidates in elections. This is also true in the Nigerian context. When religious leaders run for office or team up with other politicians as running mates, religion makes an appearance in politics. In such cases, religious leaders mobilize their congregations to vote for the party on whose platform they are running. In the 2007 and 2011 presidential elections in Nigeria, the immediate past President Muhammadu Buhari ran with two separate Senior Pastors of leading Pentecostal churches: Pastor Tunde Bakare and Pastor Yemi Osinbajo. While he lost the 2011 election against Pastor Tunde Bakare, he won the 2015 polls with Pastor Yemi Osinbajo. Similarly, Pastor Christ Okotie of the Household of God congregation has been running for president since 2003. These pastors exploited their position as church leaders to persuade their congregations to vote for them and their political parties.

Civic and Leadership Training: Another avenue through which religion can be used for political

mobilization is civic and leadership training provided by religious organizations. Churches and Muslim Leagues in Nigeria organize civic training for their members to improve their skills. Some are trained to monitor elections as civil society observers, while others are trained in the art of leadership, which eventually encourages them to participate in politics. The Justice, Development, and Peace Commission instituted by the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria in all the dioceses of the country has been a forerunner for this level of religious mobilization for politics. Nolte, Danjibo, and Oladeji have written extensively about the JDPC's role as a Faith-Based Organisation in political mobilization. "During the 1999, 2003, and 2007 elections, the JDPC ran mass orientation campaigns through seminars and open-air rallies" (Nolte, 2014: 8). They also printed and distributed relevant pamphlets, resulting in recorded video and audio files of electoral malpractices and abuses....it was (also) based on the documentation provided by the JDPC for the 2003 elections that the former Governor of Anambra state, Peter Obi, was able to challenge Chris Ngige's official electoral victory" (Nolte, Danjibo, & Oladeji, 2019: 58). In Nigeria, the JDPC is a great example of how religious platforms are utilized to mobilize people politically. It organizes symposiums and seminars, trains citizens, monitors elections, and drafts reports that were tenable in legal suits that followed elections that were rigged.

Consequences of Using Religion as a Tool for Political Mobilization

Religion as a tool for political mobilization has the intriguing property of being a two-edged sword. It can unite the country while also having the potential to further split it (Okon, 2008: 2). Politicians use religion as a political mobilization tool to transcend ethnic and linguistic divides and design a path that unites the nation. This aspect of religious aptitude was intensively researched during the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Obasanjo came to power in 1999, ending a lengthy period of Northern Muslim military control in Nigeria. Kukah (2012) captures some of the things

he did to win the support of both Christians and Muslims which included; the completion of the Ecumenical Centre (a project that was abandoned for over twenty years), the appointment of a Presidential Chaplain for the Villa, the construction of a Presidential Chapel in the same Villa, approval of creation of the Nigeria Inter-religious Council (NIREC), organization of fundraising for the renovation of the National Mosque, Open participation in Muslim Ramadan and sharing in the breaking of fast, Development of strong relations with the Sultan of Sokoto (the spiritual head of the Muslim faithful in Nigeria), open acceptance of a Traditional Title from the Sultanate, maintained the tempo of support for the Muslim Pilgrimage.

Obasanjo's actions prompted religious leaders to rally support for him and his political party among their congregations, both in church and in the mosque. During his presidency, the Muslim-Christian split was kept to a bare minimum. Following Obasanjo, successive regimes attempted to find a balance between the two major religions to gain political support by forming partnerships with various religious groups and leaders. From Yaradua (Muslim) that offered Amnesty to Niger Delta militants who were predominantly Christians to Jonathan (Christian) who build many universities in the academically backward Muslim North to Buhari (Muslim) who selected a Pastor, Yemi Osinbajo as his running mate. All these are strategies used by different politicians to massage religious egos and gain political support.

Religion, on the other hand, was not always employed in politics to build national unity. Using religion as a political tool in many multi-religious societies, such as Nigeria, frequently ends up further dividing the country. This has also occurred in Nigeria. Buhari's campaign team used the Boko Haram insurgency to make Jonathan unpopular among Muslims. This contributed to Jonathan's defeat in the 2015 elections. The incorporation of Sharia into the constitution has frequently been utilized as a campaign platform by Northern politicians to gain the support of their constituents, usually splitting Christians from Muslims who

consider all attempts to establish Sharia as an attempt to Islamize Nigeria. Furthermore, in the continuing herders/farmers clash in Nigeria, Christians have appealed to religious feelings. Fulani herders have been attacking Christian towns in the middle belt, particularly in Benue State, where a law prohibiting open grazing of cattle was established. Jonathan has often blamed these attacks on the spillover from the Libyan situation. This has sparked intense Christian condemnation, with Southerners accusing him of being indifferent to the frequent killings of Christians. They further accuse him of masterminding a huge plan to build a Fulani Islamic nation. The country is at it once more. Politicians are using religious discourse in a variety of ways to broaden their political support base.

Recommendations

This study affirms that religion is an important component in Nigerian politics which can be used as a powerful instrument for political mobilization. It is important to recognize the significant impacts of religion on Nigerian society and its potential to shape political discourse and actions. However, it is equally important to approach the use of religion in politics with caution, as it can both foster unity and contribute to ethnoreligious crises. To address the implications of religion in Nigerian politics, the following recommendations were made:

1. That religious organizations should encourage open and constructive conversations between different religious groups to foster understanding, tolerance, and cooperation. Interfaith dialogues can help bridge gaps, reduce suspicion, and build trust among communities, creating an atmosphere conducive to political cooperation and national unity.
2. That government should emphasize the importance of a secular state where religious freedom is protected, and the government remains neutral regarding religion. This will help ensure that governance decisions are based on principles of fairness, equality, and the common good, rather than favoring any particular religious group.

3. That governments should promote civic education that highlights the importance of critical thinking, respect for diversity, and active participation in political processes. By educating citizens on their rights and responsibilities, as well as the principles of democracy, they can make informed decisions based on shared values and national interests, rather than religious biases.
4. Political leaders should play a vital role in promoting religious harmony and discouraging the manipulation of religion for political gain. They should actively work towards inclusivity, equitable representation, and avoiding divisive rhetoric that exploits religious sentiments. Responsible leadership can help mitigate the risks of religion being used as a weapon for political mobilization.
5. By focusing on the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, the government can address some of the root causes of religious tensions, as economic grievances often intertwine with religious and ethnic divisions.

Conclusion

Although, it is emphasized that Nigeria is a secular state, religion wields a lot of power. This power has been exploited by religious leaders as they play the roles of religious activists. Religion is a powerful component in Nigerian politics which has been used as a powerful instrument for political mobilization. Religion has been a key component of Nigerian politics because it molds people's worldviews, affects their thought patterns, guides state decisions, and serves as a barometer to measure government legitimacy. Some religious techniques for political mobilization include civic and leadership education, politically oriented preaching (campaigns), and active participation as political candidates. Voter turnout, campaign work, contacting government officials, demonstrating, and participating in community politics can all be influenced by religion. Religion should be used as a political weapon to mobilize people towards national unity, and not used to produce very sharp dichotomies, which are often connected with significant ethno-religious crises.

One can safely posit that the elites and leaders of the two major religions are most interested in exploring routes that will help construct a stronger and more united country while limiting their disparities. Reading religious undertones into every national, state, or municipal government activity is a prescription for disaster and a ticking time bomb for the country.

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