

RELIGIOUS OUTLOOK ON THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Religion all over the world is sustained as a powerful tool in the political life of a nation. There has been very consistent and unbroken interaction between religion and politics. Through the agency of scholarship, various ways in which religion has played a role in making or marring the political process has been captured. But in Nigeria, the religious outlook on the electoral process in the 2023 general elections has not been adequately problematized. Although, the positive contributions of religion to a healthy political life through the electoral process cannot be ignore, the fact remains that intolerance amongst religious bodies is a fundamental challenge in the execution of a free, fair and credible election. This implies that Nigeria's politico-religious problems have religious colorations and connotations. It is against this backdrop that, this paper is designed, using the descriptive methodological approach, to discuss the subject of religious outlook in the 2023 general elections. The study discovered that religion is a major determinant of directions and dimensions, prospects and challenges of Nigerian electoral process. The paper recommends that religion should not be deployed to manipulate election processes. It should only be properly and positively appropriated to ensure the sustainability of a health democracy through a free, fair and credible electoral process.

Keywords: religion, outlook, election, electoral process, general election.

Introduction

Throughout much of human history, religion and politics have been deeply intertwined. In ancient civilizations like Egypt, Assyria, Greece, Rome, and the Incas of America, the roles of kingship and priesthood were closely connected. It was often challenging to differentiate between rulers with sacred powers and priests with political authority. The idea of a priest-king was prevalent across various continents. In African traditional societies, religion permeated every aspect of political life. Rulers were viewed as representatives of the land's gods and were responsible for upholding the desires of the ancestors. These political arrangements were widely accepted by the people as religious obligations.

Nigeria, a diverse country with multiple religious groups, experiences the most prominent interaction among these groups during general elections (Ogbu in Oyenekwe and Chioma, 2023). Religion holds significant importance in modern Nigeria, captivating the attention of many Nigerians and becoming a prevalent topic of discussion in various media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. The majority of Nigerians exhibit a keen interest in religion due to its perceived benefits. Nigeria, being a pluralistic society, allows different religious followers to coexist and freely engage in their daily activities (Aliko and Ekpo, Qtd by Oyenekwe and Chioma, 2023)

Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) are the three main religions in Nigeria (Aliko, cited in Oyenekwe and Chioma, 2023). Other religions practiced in Nigeria include Hinduism, Judaism, Grail Message, and Reformed Ogboni Fraternity, but they are followed by foreigners or a small number of Nigerians (McKinnon, in Oyenekwe and Chioma, 2023). Despite their differing beliefs, Christianity and Islam have the most influence in Nigerian politics. These religious groups hold significant power in Nigeria's political landscape.

Religion's influence on Nigerian politics, particularly after independence, has posed a threat to the country's secularism (Adeoye and Umeanolue, quoted by Oyenekwe and Chioma, 2023). While religion is deeply ingrained in Nigerian society, it is generally not used to incite problems. To promote fairness and inclusivity, measures have been taken to ensure that public gatherings, such as political rallies and national events, do not favor any particular religion. Prayers are either not offered or are led by representatives of recognized religions (Umeanolue, in Oyenekwe and Chioma 2023). This approach aims to prevent conflicts from escalating into violence by ensuring equal representation and respect for all religious groups.

Religion in Nigeria has a significant impact on politics in three main ways: through direct involvement of religious individuals, merging religion and politics, and implementing religious doctrine or laws in governance. In the electoral process, religion often plays a role in choosing presidential and gubernatorial candidates to protect the interests of religious adherents. It is common to see a ticket with both a Muslim and Christian candidate (Ayantayo, quoted in Oyenekwe and Chioma, 2023)

Religious beliefs have a strong influence on voting and campaigning, shaping support for candidates and discouraging voters from choosing them. This can result in Christians opposing Muslim candidates and vice versa. Religion's impact extends beyond politics, affecting the economy, social relationships, education, and society's overall mindset. The political power held by individuals or groups has significant and wide-ranging consequences.

The relationship between religion and politics is significant and unavoidable. While there is often a demand for separation, it is frequently used conveniently. In reality, religion and politics are inherently interconnected for two primary reasons. Firstly, political power is sacred and must be treated with reverence to be effective. Secondly, individuals often have both political and religious identities that influence each other. Nigeria, despite emphasizing the separation of religion and politics, often contradicts this principle in practice. Politics involves allocating values and determining who receives what, when, and how. In the Nigerian political landscape, religion and politics are inseparable. Therefore, it is logical to assume that religion has a political outlook in our electoral processes.

Religious organizations in Nigerian politics have openly endorsed presidential candidates since 1999. They serve as representatives and protectors of the interests of religious groups, and governments rely on their guidance for policies, projects, and programs, as evidenced in the recent election. The introduction of the "Muslim-Muslim ticket" by the All Progressive Party (APC) sparked controversy and debates within the political landscape. Christian communities openly opposed the party and threatened to vote against it.

The candidate faced pressure but did not abandon the idea due to the predominantly Muslim population in the North-Western and North-Eastern regions, where support was expected. This decision caused dissatisfaction among Christian communities, who openly challenged the party and its presidential candidate. The situation posed a threat as Christian communities deviated from political tradition and considered voting against the party, which had significant implications for the political landscape and religious representation dynamics.

The controversy revealed religious divisions and tensions in Nigerian society, highlighting the religious outlook during the electoral processes.. It is against this backdrop, that this study is designed to investigate religious outlook on the Nigeria 2023 general electoral processes.

Religion and Politics in Nigeria

Africa is a continent where religion is deeply ingrained in society, intertwining with all aspects of life. Despite attempts to separate religion from socio-economic and political spheres, it remains a pervasive force in African existence (Clarke and Jennings and Obaji, Agbiji, *et al.* Qtd by Odii and Anigbo, 2023).

Nigeria's religious status as a secular country has sparked heated debate, marred by aggression, fanaticism, hubris, and biases. The 1999 Constitution acknowledges the right of Nigerians to Shari'a justice, establishing Shari'a Courts of Appeal in specific states and in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. These provisions raise doubts about Nigeria's true secular nature and the credibility of its secularism claim.

Religion in Nigeria has significantly impacted politics, as noted by Eso, Omoregbe, Umeanolue quoted by Odii and Anigbo (2023) Three key ways religion has shaped the political landscape are: religious leaders

actively engaging in politics; a blending of religion and politics, resulting in the intertwining of religious beliefs and political ideologies; and the influence of religious doctrines and laws on politics and governance, leading to the implementation of policies aligned with religious ideals and principles (Omoregbe cited by Odii and Anigbo 2023). These diverse channels demonstrate the evident influence of religion on Nigeria's political landscape. Falana, Qtd in Odii and Anigbo, (2023) argues that:

The real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is the need to obscure from the people of Nigeria, a fundamental aspect of our reality; that is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed. And this is to enable this class to cover themselves with religious and ethnic disguises in order to further entrench division among our people, slow down their awakening at any cost; even the unity of our country for which so much has been sacrificed.

Religious politics in Nigeria is widespread, impacting governance, policy-making, and the electoral process. The Pilgrim Welfare Boards favor Christian and Muslim pilgrimages, while neglecting African Traditional Religion. Christianity and Islam exert significant influence on Nigerian politics. Christianity and Islam have had a significant impact on politics in Nigeria, as supported by Onwubiko quoted in Odii and Anigbo (2023) state that

The two dominant religious organizations viz: Christian religion and Moslem religion have held both the federal and state governments on the jugular veins to be committing unimaginable amount of scarce public funds to sponsoring their adherents to the yearly pilgrimages abroad. Since the blackmail to sabotage government if it fails to sponsor pilgrimages gained ascendancy, federal and state governments have been contending with the needs of these religious organizations and their leaders.

Nigeria is consistently ranked as one of the most religious nations globally. According to the Pew Research Center's 2015 Global Attitudes Survey, 88% of Nigerians stated that religion plays a significant role in their lives. Additionally, a 2005 survey by the BBC World Service showed that 85% of Nigerians trust religious leaders and are willing to grant them more authority. These findings challenge the notion of secularization in Nigeria, as argued by Gill quoted by Odii and Anigbo (2023) who believes that secularization theory is outdated and no longer applicable in the social sciences. Stark and Finke quoted by Odii and Anigbo (2023) argue that the secularization doctrine, after years of failed predictions and misinterpretations, should be laid to rest as an unsuccessful theory.

Politics in Nigeria has long been marred by irregularities and disruptions, primarily due to the impact of religion and ethnicity on the ambitions of past and present leaders. Religion has exerted a substantial influence on the nation's political terrain, particularly in the northern region where religious sway prevails. This influence can be traced back to the early stages of Nigerian elections.

During the 1950s, political parties in Nigeria, particularly in the northern region, had a religious undertone. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) emerged during this period, reflecting this religious character. The NPC, influenced by Islam, was the most popular party in the region (Onapajo, 2016; Ntamu, Abia, Edinyang, and Eneji, Qtd by Odii and Anigbo 2023).

Examining the connection between politics and religion in Nigeria necessitates emphasizing the importance of tolerance. Habermas quoted by Odii and Anigbo (2023) defines tolerance as the mutual recognition and respect among believers of different faiths, as well as non-believers, for each other's right to hold beliefs, engage in rituals, and live diverse lives (Tarihi in Odii and Anigbo, 2023)

Religious tolerance is essential for the growth and progress of Nigeria, a diverse country. It is rooted in liberal ideals and serves as the moral foundation of democracy, supporting cultural, moral, and political pluralism. Ekwunife (1992), Kukathas (2003), Kukathas (1992), and Habermas (2004) have all emphasized the importance of toleration in fostering a harmonious society.

A Review on the nexus of Politics, Religion and Electoral processes

Nigeria's classification as a religious, secular, or ecumenical state is a topic of debate among scholars. Some argue that Nigeria should be seen as a religious or multi-religious state due to the widespread presence of religious references in Nigerian society. This includes the recognition of Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion in various formal and informal contexts.

Nigeria is a subject of debate regarding its secular status. One perspective argues that it is a secular state due to the absence of an official state religion and the protection of religious freedom by the constitution. This viewpoint emphasizes the lack of religion's official role in the country's affairs. Conversely, another perspective suggests that Nigeria is not strictly secular, as religion holds significant influence in Nigerian politics. This perspective characterizes Nigeria as an "ecumenical state" where power-sharing arrangements exist between the state and religious institutions without legal codification.

Jamiu (2012) examines the intricate connection between religion and politics in Nigeria. He asserts that despite Nigeria's federalism, which prohibits the establishment of a state religion by both federal and state governments, individuals, groups, and even government officials still operate within the framework of their chosen religion, be it paganism, atheism, Christianity, or Islam. This implies that the Nigerian constitution permits the practice of any religion. However, the constitution explicitly opposes any government endeavor to officially adopt a particular religion as the state religion.

In some Nigerian states today, Christianity or Islam is informally adopted as the de facto state religion, resulting in the denial of political rights to minority religious groups. For instance, in predominantly Muslim states, it is highly improbable for a Christian Governor to be elected, and the same applies in predominantly Christian states. The politicization of religion in Nigeria has raised concerns, especially during the Constituent Assembly debate on the inclusion of Sharia in the constitution from December 1976 to June 1978.

During the period discussed, the Jama'at Nasril Islam (JNI) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) were initially unaware and unprepared to voice their concerns about government decisions and their impact on their religious principles and practices. However, specific events compelled these religious organizations to become politically active and safeguard the interests of their respective religions (Jamiu, 2012).

In February 1976, a meeting was held between Christian leaders and the federal government, initiated by the government. During the meeting, a participant requested to conclude with a prayer, despite the meeting not starting with one. Brigadier Yar'adua, the host, explained that due to the various denominations present, he was unsure who should lead the prayer. This observation by the government led to the spontaneous formation of a more nationally representative Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which emerged from the existing Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and Northern Christian Association (NCA) with headquarters in Oyo and Kaduna respectively.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) emerged as a result of Christians engaging with the government, leading to the politicization of religion in Nigeria. This prompted a response from the Muslim community, resulting in the re-activation of the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) and Da'awah activities, as well as the Muslim Students Society (MSS) literary activities. The establishment of CAN and the resurgence of JNI and MSS were driven by the commitment of their followers to propagate their respective religions. This ultimately led to both Muslim and Christian organizations closely monitoring each other's activities with suspicion and fear of one group attempting to dominate the other through numerical strength or influential positions in government.

In Nigeria, the establishment of welfare boards for Muslim and Christian pilgrims emerged as an issue. The Western Region took the lead in 1958 by establishing the Muslim Pilgrims Welfare Board, followed by the Northern Region in 1959. In response to demands for equal treatment and rights, Christians in Nigeria pushed for the creation of welfare boards for both religions. The government subsequently established welfare boards for both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

During the formation of political parties in the Second Republic of Nigeria (1979-1984), the composition of party officials nationwide was determined by two major factors: ethnic affiliation, geographical spread, and

religious inclination. These factors influenced the allocation of positions within the party offices. In Nigeria, there was a tradition where a Muslim presidential candidate from the North would have a Christian running mate from the South. This principle also applied to the positions of Chairman and Secretary in registered political parties in 1978, except for the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). In the UPN, Chief Obafemi Awolowo held both the positions of presidential candidate and party chairman. His running mate, Mr. Philip Umeadi, was also a Christian from the South, specifically from Anambra state. This strategy may have been a response to the UPN's failure in the 1979 General Elections.

During the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria, both the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) employed a strategy known as the "Muslim-Christian ticket" or "Christian-Muslim ticket". The APC had General Muhamadu Buhari, a northern Muslim, as their presidential candidate, while Professor Yemi Osinbajo, a southern Christian, served as their vice-presidential candidate. Similarly, the PDP followed suit, with Former President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, and Vice-president Namadi Sambo, a Muslim, as their presidential flag-bearers. This practice has proven successful in winning elections in Nigeria, underscoring the significant influence of religion on Nigerian politics and election outcomes.

In the 2023 Presidential election, the All Progressives Congress made a significant departure from tradition by running on a "Muslim-Muslim ticket." This decision disregarded warnings and calls from religious institutions and sparked controversy and tension, particularly among Christian communities. These communities openly challenged the party and its candidate, even going as far as threatening to vote against the party. In contrast, the other major political parties, the PDP and LP, adhered to the usual pattern of running a "Muslim-Christian ticket" and a "Christian-Muslim ticket" respectively.

A Review of the Nigeria 2023 general electoral processes

Since 1999, the PDP and the APC have consistently won elections at both the state and national levels in Nigeria. Their success can be attributed to their large membership sizes, nationwide presence, and the lack of strong opposition. In the past twenty-four years, power has alternated between these two parties, with the PDP holding power for sixteen years and the APC for eight years. Since 2015, Nigeria's presidential elections have consistently featured candidates from the two major political parties. The selection of candidates for the presidency and vice presidency has traditionally followed an unwritten rule of a "Muslim-Christian ticket" or a "Christian-Muslim ticket." Both major political parties have unquestionably adhered to this practice (Salahu, 2017).

In the 2023 Presidential election, the All Progressives Congress (APC) broke from tradition and ran on a "Muslim-Muslim ticket", despite warnings from religious institutions. The other major parties, PDP and LP, opted for a "Muslim-Christian ticket" and a "Christian-Muslim ticket" respectively.

The APC Presidential candidate's decision to run on a "Muslim-Muslim ticket" sparked controversy and debates within the political landscape. Christian communities openly challenged the party and threatened to vote against it. Despite pressure, the candidate refused to abandon the idea, citing the need for party victory in the general election. He argued that the North-Western and North-Eastern regions, where he expected support, were predominantly Muslim.

The APC candidate's insistence on a "Muslim-Muslim ticket" intensified the already heated political climate in Nigeria. Christian communities openly voiced their dissatisfaction and challenged the party and its Presidential candidate. This critical situation posed a threat of Christian communities voting against the party, which deviated from political tradition and had significant implications for the political landscape and religious representation dynamics. The controversy surrounding the "Muslim-Muslim ticket" shed light on deep-seated religious divisions and tensions in Nigerian society.

The tense political atmosphere, influenced by religious factors, raised serious concerns about the deployment of BVAS for the election. Accusations and counter-accusations between the three major political parties regarding INEC's preparedness and impartiality as an electoral body added to the doubts leading up to the election. INEC's real-time election result uploads on its portal helped alleviate tension and restore confidence among the electorate. However, some critics doubted BVAS's effectiveness and expressed concerns about

potential vulnerabilities during the collation process. Additionally, there were fears of post-election violence due to inflammatory language used by supporters of major political parties.

The recent election in Nigeria revealed a lack of political skill among the country's leaders. The three main political parties conducted careless campaigns, using political and religious tactics to undermine their opponents. This blatant disregard for political integrity ignored Sekoni's (2014) warning that citizens wanted to hear how each candidate planned to address pressing issues like corruption, security, a struggling economy, a failing education and healthcare system, and the divisive actions of politically motivated religious extremists.

Serious allegations and counter-allegations were made by political parties, accusing each other of using religion to gain votes. The country also faced challenges with the Central Bank of Nigeria's naira swap policy and fuel scarcity. Despite these obstacles, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) managed to conduct the election with relative success.

The recent election in the country was hailed as the most successful ever, despite some political parties being involved in reported infractions. The Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) played a crucial role in curbing ballot box snatching, election rigging, and multiple voting. Additionally, the Central Bank of Nigeria's naira swap policy effectively reduced instances of vote-buying. It is important to acknowledge that the implementation of BVAS technology has greatly reduced electoral fraud.

During the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria, the two major opposition parties made significant gains against the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC). Strongholds were lost by the APC to opposition parties, including Lagos State, which surprisingly went to the relatively new Labour party, despite Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu's political control over the state for the past twenty-four years. Incumbent governors also faced defeat in their senatorial elections to opposition candidates in their respective states. Even President Muhammadu Buhari failed to secure a victory for his party, APC, in his home state of Katsina.

In the 2023 Presidential election, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the ruling APC won with 8,794,726 votes. Despite running on a 'Muslim-Muslim Ticket,' Tinubu's victory was achieved despite warnings and threats from the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). The opposing candidates, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi of the People's Democratic Party and Labour Party respectively, garnered 6,984,520 and 6,101,533 votes. This election marked a historic moment in Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, as it was the first time a party ran on a Muslim-Muslim ticket and emerged victorious.

Religious Outlook in the Nigerian 2023 General electoral process

Nigeria's religious distribution across its six geopolitical zones is crucial to understand. The country is almost evenly divided between Christianity and Islam, with Muslims predominantly in the north and Christians in the south. Muslims account for 50.8% of the population, while Christians make up 47.9%. According to the 2001 CIA Factbook, 50% of the population is Muslim, 40% is Christian, and 10% follows traditional beliefs. However, recent reports suggest that the Christian population has slightly surpassed the Muslim population. In 2010, 49.3% of Nigeria's population was Christian, 48.8% were Muslims, and 1.9% followed indigenous or other religions, or were unaffiliated, according to the Pew Research Center.

These descriptions of religion distribution across each geopolitical zone were key factors in the 2023 electoral process digest in Nigeria. The campaigns were marked by politicians, parties, supporters, and advocates using religious appeals aggressively. Corruption, perjury, and other wrongdoings were also prominent issues. Religion held significant sway and dominated the campaigns.

Prominent among others is the scenario of the presidential election. Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Muslim and the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), recently chose Senator Kashim Shettima, also a Muslim, as his running mate. This decision generated controversy, with the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and prominent Church leaders criticizing it as an effort to Islamize Nigeria. On the other hand, Muslim groups in Nigeria have shown full support for the Muslim-Muslim ticket. The role and significance of religion and religious outlook in Nigerian politics once again came to the forefront. In the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, the All Progressives Congress (APC) focused on religion, adopting a Muslim-Muslim ticket to secure support from the heavily Muslim-populated northern states. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) took a different approach, nominating a Muslim presidential candidate,

Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, and a Christian vice presidential candidate, Senator Ifeanyi Okowa. This strategic move aimed at appealing to voters from both religious communities and promote inclusivity.

Religion played a major role in the campaigns, along with political ideologies, track records, and public policies. Parties recognized Nigeria's diverse religious landscape and made efforts to address the concerns of citizens from various religious backgrounds.

The Labour Party has selected Mr. Peter Obi, a Christian, as their presidential candidate, and Senator Datti Baba Almed, a Muslim, as their vice presidential candidate. The New Nigeria Peoples Party has chosen Senator Musa Rabiun Kwankwaso, a Muslim, as their presidential candidate, and Bishop Idahosa, a Christian, as their vice presidential candidate. This strategic decision aims to achieve religious balance and outlook to both Christianity and Islam for support, ensuring inclusivity and representation across different religious groups.

The electoral processes in the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria revealed the utilization of religious outlook to influence religious perspectives. This was evident through the selection of candidates, visits to religious groups, inclusion of religious messages at political rallies, and actions and messages of religious groups and their leaders. These findings highlight the continued significance of religion in Nigerian politics, suggesting that Nigeria does not fully embody a secular country.

The recent electoral process in Nigeria aimed to energize Christians to participate in electing the next president. This is notable as the previous two terms were led by a Muslim president. Scholars Umeanolue (2020), Okibe (2020), and Balogun (2023) have examined the role of religion in Nigerian politics and called for "religious balancing" by political parties.

Recommendations

The growth of Nigeria's democracy must take precedence over religious and other diversities for significant development. Nigeria's secular state status has been compromised and needs to be redesigned without religious influences, embracing true secularism as outlined in the constitution. To achieve this, a mass re-orientation of citizens to reject religious bigotry is necessary. The government should strengthen institutions like the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Federal and State Ministries of Information, and provide funding to relevant Civil Society Organizations. Collaboration between adherents of Islam and Christianity, particularly in areas related to nation-building, should be encouraged.

Introducing legal sanctions against those who promote the intertwining of religion and politics is crucial. This measure will deter religious bigots from spreading hate speech, especially during important political periods like election campaigns. The suggested measure is a jail sentence without the option of a fine. These steps will help Nigeria achieve its secular status as outlined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the electoral outlook in Nigeria highlights the influence of religion in politics. Our research shows that voters in predominantly Christian regions preferred a Christian candidate, while voters in predominantly Muslim regions backed a Muslim candidate. This pattern indicates that religion plays a crucial role in shaping election results in Nigeria.

Nigeria, a secular state, is a multi-religious country where religion plays a significant role in the distribution of power and resources in politics. Religious affiliations greatly influence elections, impacting the outcomes.

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