

Ethno-Religious Identity and Voter Environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria: A Cross Sectional Analysis

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Abstract

A cursory look at the presidential election in a multi-cleavage country like Nigeria, often reveals a fascinating process replete with identity consciousness and euphoria. Scholarly review illuminates obvious gaps in issues and sentiments of voter environment to establish the functionality of ethno-religious identity in voting behaviour of Nigerians in presidential elections. This study therefore examines issues underlying ethno-religious identity in the voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria. The methodology of this discourse is exploratory research design with emphasis on documentary and Key Informant interview as sources of data collection. Thus, sample size of 36 Key Informants were selected from the six regions of the federation through purposive-random sampling procedure and interviewed in face-to-face interaction, telephone communication, Focus Group Discussion etc where responses and empirical data gathered were documented, presented and content-analyzed. The study revealed that voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections were immersed in varied scale and intensity of ethno-religious consciousness among millions of Nigeria voters which stemmed from the identity background of candidates of frontline political parties. It therefore concluded that many Nigerians are very conscious and interested in the ethno-religious identities of candidates of frontline political parties in a presidential election amid other issues or narratives. Hence, this study therefore recommends citizens' interest in national governance expectations, legitimization of zoning principle, strict enforcement of presidential campaign guidelines amid other fundamentals in effort to strengthen Nigeria's electoral democracy.

Key words: Elections, ethno-religious, regionalism, voter environment.

Introduction

Nigeria as African largest democracy has had ten presidential elections in 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 to the most recent 2023 poll in democratic transition to political power. These elections provided insight in nature and dynamics of Nigeria's voting behaviour. Hence, the dynamics of voting orientation of Nigerians is inextricably a reflection of its cleavage background. Nigeria is a plural nation-state and is divided along regional, ethnic and religious lines.

A cursory observation of Nigeria's voter environments of presidential elections showed that voting behaviour is influenced by certain tendencies that stem from identity

politics such as regionalism, ethnicity, religion etc (Ekenna 1989, Adeniyi, 2012 and Nnabuihe, *etal*, 2014). In this vein, Olayode (2015) cited in Ezirim, *e tal*, (2016) argued that identity politics nurtured from colonial era had assumed new trends and dimensions in which political parties and candidates are easily perceived as representatives of a particular ethnic or religious group and voting pattern in Christian–Muslim states. In reference to the presidential elections, the fault lines of region, ethnicity and religion run deep in Nigeria. Similarly, Adibe, (2015) further remarked that every part of the country has an institutionalized memory of injury or feeling of injustice which it often feels will be best addressed if one of their own wields power at the centre preferably as the president. In specific reference to 2011 presidential election, Ojo and Bello (2011), revealed that in the build-up to 2011 presidential election, the country was already tensed with identity narratives on “who will call the shots at Aso Villa” whether it should be Southern-Christian president or Northern-Muslim president. However, Raymond (2012) and Eze, *e tal* (2013), thought otherwise and shared the view that Nigerians before 2011 presidential election have decided to vote for “who takes responsibility of the affairs of this nation in next four years” on the grounds of performance, vision and capacity and dismissed ethno-religious euphoria before the election. In the voter environment of 2015 presidential election, Mohammed (2014) queried that the underperformance of the incumbent president, Dr Jonathan in securing the people, infrastructure and investment of the North against Isil-Boko Haram terrorism will certainly make millions of Nigeria voters to embrace Buhari for change. In a contrary and succinct view, Jimoh (2015), revealed that the Northern and Southern politicians in months before the March presidential poll were engrossed in campaign of hate along regional, ethnic and religious lines either for Jonathan or Buhari. In the North, the regional consensus was, “*this is the time to have a Northern-Muslim president*” while in the South, there were strong moves to consolidate Jonathan’s presidency raising fear of possible violent presidential election. However in the build up to most recent presidential election, Agidi (2020), Williams and Agba (2019) opined that cleavage identity was not the popular campaign issues in the 2019 presidential election because Nigerians are facing hard times of insecurity and bad economy. Conversely, Dele (2019) thinks otherwise with emphasis on the regional and ethno-religious background of the running mates of the two frontline presidential candidates which becomes topical issue among millions of voters in the South. From scholarly submissions, the reality of ethno-religious factor in the voter environment of Nigeria elections is historical as embellished (Nnabuihe, *etal*, 2014, Ezirim, *etal*, 2016 and Adibe, 2015).

However, ‘the problem’ emanates from varied observations and perspectives of scholars as underlined in the significance and insignificance of ethno-religious identity in the voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. The polemics of scholarly observations therefore elicit fundamental questions in the functionality of ethno-religious identity as prevailing reality or illusion in these presidential elections. What really exacerbate the consciousness of ethno-religious sentiments (if observed and established) in the voter environments of these successive presidential polls? And, how important or popular were these ethno-religious issues among the electorate in the voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections? Perhaps, what are the issues or narratives underlying significance or insignificance of ethno-religious identity in voter

enthusiasm (turnout) and voting choices (preferences) in these presidential elections which were remarkably different in process and outcome for the purpose of establishing trend and pattern of voting behaviours of Nigerians? Therefore, the explicit thrust of this cross sectional research is to establish the reality or illusion of ethno-religious identity in voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria. This paper is divided into six sections- this introduction, conceptual discourse, methodology, data presentation, data interpretation and analysis, conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptual Discourse

In a conceptual sense, the term, 'identity' is vague and polemical. It is a concept replete with multi-disciplinary conceptualizations and interpretations among scholars of social sciences. In this vein, Buckingham (2008) remarked that identity is an ambiguous and slippery term. It has been used and perhaps overused in many different contexts and for many different purposes, particularly in recent years. To underscore the relevance of the concept of identity in political science scholarship, Fearon (1999), remarked that more than two decades ago, scholars of social science and humanities disciplines have taken an intense interest in questions concerning identity. Within political science, for example, the concept of "identity" is at the center of lively debates in every major subfield. Students of American politics have devoted much new research to the "identity politics" of race, gender and sexuality. In comparative politics, "identity" plays a central role in work on nationalism and ethnic conflict (Horowitz 1985; Smith, 1991; Deng 1995; Laitin, 1999). In international relations, the idea of "state identity" is at the heart of constructivist critiques of realism and analyses of state sovereignty (Wendt, 1992; Wendt 1999; Katzenstein 1996; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996; Biersteker and Weber, 1996). And in political theory, questions of "identity" mark numerous arguments on gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity and culture in relation to liberalism and its alternative (Young 1990; Connolly 1991; Kymlicka 1995; Miller 1995; Taylor 1989).

Basically, the concept of identity was expounded by a psychologist Erik Erikson in the 1950's. In a generic sense, Fearon (1999) also indicated that an "identity" refer to either (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors, or (b) socially distinguishing feature that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or (a) and (b) at once). In the latter sense, "identity" is modern formulation of dignity, pride, or honor that implicitly links these to social categories. This statement differs from and is more concrete than standard glosses offered by political scientists. "Identity" can help explain political actions, and the meaning of claims such as "identities are socially constructed."

Pertinently, the concept of identity is derived from socio-political concept, defined as a "person's sense of belonging to a group if it influences his political behaviour (Erikson, 1968 cited in Nweke and Orji, 2016). Furthermore, Erickson (1968) defined identity as a socio-political concept which has both an individualist and collective meaning: It is a process located in the core of individual and in the core of the community culture; a process which established, in fact, the identity of these two identities. In other words, identity can be simply be defined as a person's sense of belonging to a group which influences his political behaviour. It is said to be always anchored both in physiological 'givens' and in

'social roles' (Tsuwa and Otsapa, 2015). From these scholarly interpretations, identity finds expressions in individual self and social collective belonging. However, (Jega 2003: 15 cited in Nweke and Orji, 2016) argued that identity is beyond individuality and self-awareness but also and especially about identification with and commitment to, shared values and beliefs in a social collectivity into which a person belongs. However, it is interesting to note that although identities are more or less fixed, identity consciousness is dynamic. Hence, mobilization, provocation and agitation are central to the formation of requisite identity consciousness critical to identity politics.

Subsequently, the term, ethno-religious is used to explain how societies are divided. People belong to one ethnic group are often different from those who belong to another. People who follow one religion are often different from those who follow another. Therefore, political scientists, social scientist and historians look at divisions and they don't want to limit themselves to only ethnic or only religious differences, they use the term, ethno-religious to show that they are applying both classification at same time (Wittenberg, 2017). Similarly, ethno-religious is a mixture of ethnicity and religion in the lives and expression of a people (Terry, 2015).

Ethno-religious therefore implied feelings and sentiments expressed by people of identifiable tribe and religion. This peculiar feeling is a mixture of ethnic and religious fidelity visibly displayed in association, interaction and conflict with people of varied ethnic-religious background. For instance, the Ndi-igbo tribe of Christian faith in Nigeria, the Fulani tribe of Islamic faith in Senegal etc. On the other hand, ethno-religious identity is therefore the ethnic and religious background of a people in relation with other people known for their ethnic and religious backgrounds. Also, ethnic-religious identity is how a homogeneous people define themselves along ethnic and religious lines. It is also how a people are differentiated from other people on the bases of ethnic and religious attributes which define their peculiar roles, plights and expectations. Ethno-religious identity is also used to explain how societies are known and divided between people known for a particular ethnic background and religious inclination.

In illustrative instances, ethno-religious identity is felt mostly in relation between heterogeneous people of different socio-cultural and religious background. This feeling can be contextualized as identity consciousness. Identity consciousness of ethno-religious inclination is often felt: (a).When a people felt the need to promote or assert the relevance of their ethnic and religious backgrounds in relations and competition with other people. (ii) When a people felt cheated, excluded or marginalized by other people because of their ethnic and religious identities. However, reference to ethno-religious identities in Nigeria invariably illuminates the concepts of *region and regionalism*.

Region as a multidisciplinary term is immersed with varied perspectives in social science scholarship. In this study, region is operationalized as *geo-political zone*. Nigeria as a federation is made up of six geo-political zones or regions which are north-central, north-east, north-west, south-south, south-east and south-west. The 36 states and 774 local councils are clustered unequally in these regions or geo-political zones. The imbalance in the distribution of states and local councils across these regions lent credence to the vehemence of identity consciousness embellishing in *regionalism*. The concept of regionalism is depleted with polemical interpretations. Hence, there are

conceptualizations of regionalism in the contexts of international political relations, international political economic relations, geo-politics in continental affairs and federation discourse. In this study, regionalism is operationalized as consciousness of regional identity, interest and expectations. It is also contextualized as sense of regional consciousness (of identity, interest and expectation) reflective in attitude and action in relations and competitions. Furthermore, there is a significant affinity between regional identification and ethno-religious inclinations with reference to what is described in the context of this study as *homogeneous ethnic-religious regions* (south-east region of predominant Igbo-Christians, north-west of predominant Hausa and Fulani Muslims); *heterogeneous ethnic-religious region* (like north-central of predominant ethnic minorities of mixed religious identities); *homogeneous ethnic region in mixed religious inclinations* (south-west of predominant Yoruba Christian and Muslim populations); *heterogeneous ethnic region in homogeneous religious inclination* (south-south of predominant ethnic minorities of Christian faith) and *semi-heterogeneous ethnic region in homogeneous religious inclination* (north-east of predominant Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri of Islamic faith).

The pertinent question is, *whether regional interest correlate with ethno-religious expectations?* This assertion has remained a polemical discourse among scholars of social sciences. However, the fundamentals is obvious under the following: (a) Analysis of ethno-religious identities in Nigeria is inadequate without reference to the regions. (b) Sense of regionalism can be demonstrated along ethno-religious sentiment. However, both can independently occur or felt in isolation of each other. In this study, attempt is made to examine the functionality of ethno-religious identity in voter environments across the six geo-political zones or regions in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. And, also to establish significance or insignificance of regionalism as intervening or correlating variable amid the influence of ethno-religious sentiment in these voter environments.

In this vein, voter environment is contextualized as prevailing realities and issues shared as 'narratives' among the electorate which tends to influence voter turnout and determine voting choices (preference) between candidates and political parties during election. Voter environment is also contextualized as values and opinions shared among voters which inform and determine or influence voter preference during polls. For instance, issues of candidate credibility, party identification, governance, economic challenges and other national expectations shared among Nigeria voters as "popular narratives". Every country has peculiarity of its voter environment which illuminate perception and expectations of the electorate in preference for candidates and political parties. Also, candidates and political parties are often conscious of the voter environment for gainful engagement with the electorate during campaigns and rallies.

In Nigeria as revealed by scholars and empirical observation, there are prevailing circumstances and issues that often motivate or drive voter enthusiasm and inform the electoral choice of the voters. It is however important to note that voter environment of presidential, gubernatorial and municipal elections differ in view of their context, prevailing issues and expectations. In Nigeria's recent presidential elections, the voter environment is often characterized by popular narratives or issues such as governance performance, insecurity challenges (Boko Haram insurgency, banditry), and secessionist agitations, economic conditions (stagflation) restructuring, etc. Again, there other issues

such as identity background of presidential candidates and running mates across political parties, rotational presidency between North-South divide, demand for Nigeria president of Igbo extraction, etc. All these issues tend to influence voter turnout and voting choices of Nigerians across regions and states of the federation. In this study, attempts is made to find out whether issue or issues of ethno-religious identity were significant in the voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. To find out and reveal peculiar realities and issues of ethno-religious identity which may have informed voter turnout and voter preference for a particular candidate and political party across regions of the federation before April 2011, March 2015 and February 2019 presidential election.

Methodology

Research design presents the framework of the study in a coherent and logical sequence. The design of this study is exploratory research design. The exploratory research design explains why things or phenomenon occur, and is conducted to build theories and predict future similar behaviour or events as they occur (Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2022). The adoption of the exploratory research design is premised on the fact the study of ethno-religious identity and voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria is exploratory in attempt to identify and establish significant variables expedient to analyze and predict voter turnout and voting choices of Nigerians in a presidential election.

The study area is Nigeria. An area of 923, 769 square Kilometers made up of 909, (890 square kilometers of land and 13,879 square kilometers of water area) located in West Africa on the Gulf of Guinea (Report of National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). A Federation of 36 states, FCT and 774 local government areas clustered in six Geo-Political Zones. Nigeria is African largest democracy with a projected population of 216, 783, 381 in 2022 (Report of Nigeria Population Commission, 2020). The country's presidential election holds every four years in 119, 973 polling unit of 8, 809 electoral wards. Thus, the sample size of the Key Informants respondents was proportionally selected from the six Geo-Political Zones or regions (north-central, north-west, north-east, south-south, south-east and south-west) of the study area.

The target population of the study is voters who participated and voted in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. This statistically illustrated in 39,469,484 which representing 53.7 percent from 73.5 million registered voters in 2011 presidential election (Report of Election Monitor, 2015 and Mahmud, 2015); 29,432,083 representing 43.65 percent from 68.8 million registered voters in 2015 presidential election (Report of Election Monitor, 2015 and Adewale, *e tal*2015) and 28,614,190 representing 35.66 percent from 84 million registered voters in 2019 presidential election (Report of Election Monitor, 2019). However, the importance of the sample size illuminate below.

The sample size of Key Informant participants were 36 purposively selected on the premise of knowledgeability and representativeness to provide vital information and views on the significance or insignificance of ethno-religious identity in the voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. Suffice to state that Key Informants are not selected through random sampling rather on purposive sampling

technique because their number are small and indicative of valid views of general population (Krishna, 2009; Rob and Cherry, 2018 and Effiong, 2019). The 36 respondent Key Informants were reached on the ratio of 6 participants per state of the six states purposively selected from the six regions or geo-political zones. The following is a detail of the sample size of the Key Informants as stated below:

Table 1.1: THE DISTRIBUTION OF STATES AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATIONS OF THE KEY INFORMANTS

No	States Selected for KI Interview	Social Differentiations of the Key Informants
1	Bauchi	Representatives of Ethnic Associations/organizations
2	Bayelsa	Representatives of Religious Associations
3	Enugu	Representatives of the frontline political parties
4	Kaduna	Media practitioners (PU reporters or correspondents)
5	Nasarrawa	Representatives of Election Observer Group
6	Ogun	Public Affairs Analysts

Source: Field Study, 2023. NB: It is therefore important to note that 36 Key Informants were distributed across the six states of the six Geo-Political Zones as representatives of identity platforms, partisan groups, media reporters who covered events of voter environments of these presidential elections across North/South divide, election observer groups and public affairs analysts.

In this study, the researchers adopted the following methods of data collection: (a) Documentary source of data collection with reference to textbooks, journal articles, documentary field reports, government publications, editorials that discusses identity events of voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019. The importance of this secondary source of data collection undoubtedly generate a broad and insightful data for textual and cross sectional analysis of the effects of the ethno-religious identity in voter environments of these past successive presidential elections. (b) Interview source with emphasis on Key Informant Interview (KII) which involves conducting personal interviews with knowledgeable persons. A total of 34 personal Key Informant Interview was conducted and 2 Focus Group Discussion, FGD (of three persons each) interview was held. A pretested and validated interview guide/questionnaire was used to elicit valid data from these knowledgeable participants within and outside the study area. Furthermore, the interview guide/questionnaire was semi-structured and open-ended with emphasis on valid data not adequately covered by documentary source of data collection. The interview guide/questionnaire was administered through the following medium of interview and documentation: (c) Face-to-Face interaction while responses were recorded and noted. (d) Telephone communication with Key Informants outside the study area where responses were recorded and noted. (e) Social Media -WhatsApp chats/emails where responses were noted. (f) Focus Group Discussion (of three participants) where responses were recorded and noted.

Data Presentation

Interview Questions and Responses on Ethno-religious Identity and Voter Environments in 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria:

KI Question: *Do you consider ethno-religious identity a very significant issue among Nigeria voters before the 2011 presidential election?*

A Summary of KI Responses: To a significant extent amid other narratives or issues like failure of seven-point agenda, efforts towards sustaining peace in Niger Delta region through Amnesty programmes, insecurity challenges particularly incessant kidnapping, chances of Nuhu Ribadu, former EFCC Boss to become Nigeria president, Jonathan should be given a chance to rule because of his meekness, etc.

KI Question: *What were the ethno-religious sentiments and narratives shared by Nigeria voters across the divide (North-South) before 2011 presidential election?*

A. Summary of KI Responses (a) That a northern Muslim-Fulani irrespective of party affiliation should complete administrative tenure of late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua to promote national unity. (b) That Jonathan has the constitutional right to contest 2011 presidential election despite his ethnic minority identity, *Ijaw*. (c) That ruling Peoples Democratic Party should adhere to the provision of its zoning principle as enunciated in section 7(2c) of the party's constitution to nominate a *northern Fulani-Muslim* candidate for the 2011 presidential election. (d) That zoning principle in PDP is a party affair not recognized as a provision in the 1999 Nigeria Federal Republic Constitution (as amended) which therefore implied that every Nigerian irrespective of *tribe and faith* should contest for the office of the Executive President of the country. (e) That Buhari is a *Muslim fanatic* that should not be voted as the president of the federal republic.

KI Question *What were the factors that boosted ethno-religious sentiments and narratives shared by Nigeria voters across the divide (North-South) before the April 2011 presidential election?*

A Summary of KI Responses (a). The sudden death of a *Fulani-Muslim* President Yar'Adua in May 2010. (b). Politics of Zoning in PDP with reference to the event of July 2010, South-South regional summit at Port Harcourt for Goodluck Jonathan, a *Southern-Christian* to contest in the 2011 presidential election and August, 2010 meeting of Northern Governor's Forum where Governors were divided in support for and against zoning of the office of the president. (c) The support for Atiku Abubakar, a *Fulani-Muslim* as northern consensus candidate for the PDP presidential primaries of January 13, 2011 by Adamu Ciroma-led Northern Leaders Political Forum. (d) Charisma and cult followership of Muhammadu Buhari in states of *Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri* people of Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi, Bauchi, Borno, and Gombe in North-Wes and North-East regions of Nigeria. (e) Press conferences of endorsements and support of Jonathan's presidential ambition by *Ijaw National Congress, Conference of Ethnic nationalities in Niger Delta and Ohaneze Ndigbo* after the PDP presidential primaries. (f) The February 2011 press conference of endorsement and support for Muhammadu Buhari as a northern consensus candidate by the *Arewa Consultative Forum*. (g) Jonathan's periodic *Sunday visits to Pentecostal churches* in Abuja to solicit for *prayers* and support in the contest of 2011 presidential election. (h) The nomination of a popular *Christian pastor*, Tunde Bakare as a presidential running mate of Muhammadu Buhari of Congress for Progressive Change. (i) *Eid-Jummat prayer* by Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs for the electoral victory of Buhari/Bakare presidential bid.

KI Question: *Do you consider ethno-religious identity a very significant issue among Nigeria voters before the 2015 presidential election?*

A Summary of KI Responses: To a very significant extent amid other narratives or issues such as rapid rise in youth unemployment despite Nigeria's exponential economic growth as the largest economy in Africa in 2014, menace of Boko Haram insurgency, widespread corruption scandals in Jonathan administration, crises of PVC distribution and collection, apprehension over break-up of Nigeria in 2015, popularity of All Progressive Congress in the North, etc.

KI Question *What are the ethno-religious sentiments and narratives shared by Nigeria voters across the divide (North-South) before March 2015 presidential election?*

A Summary of KI Responses (a) That Goodluck Jonathan should not contest 2015 presidential election because it is the time for a northerner or *Fulani-Muslim* to rule Nigeria. (b) That Goodluck Jonathan as an *Ijaw-Christian* has failed to honor "single-tenure agreement" reached between him and chairman of Northern Governors' Forum, Aliyu Babangida of Niger State. (c). That every good *Muslim* irrespective of creed, party and tribe should support Buhari as the next president of the Federal Republic. (d). That every *Fulbe* or *Fulani man* in Guinea Savanna and Sudan Savanna regions of Nigeria and, West African countries (Benin, Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Niger, Senegal) that speaks *Fulfulde* should rise to support ambition of a fellow *Fulbe* brother, Buhari as the next president in African largest country, Nigeria. (e). That Buhari is coming with the agenda of "Islamization of the country". (f). That the new mega political party, APC is an *Islamist* political party for *janjaweed agenda*. (g). That Jonathan's presidency is the "hope" for the peace and development of *Niger Delta*. (h). That Jonathan has an Igbo name 'Azikiwe' and should be supported as a 'brother' across the Niger. (i). That Jonathan failed to ensure more inclusion of *Yoruba people* in his government inspite of their support in 2011 presidential election.

KI Question *What were the factors that boosted ethno-religious sentiments and narratives shared by Nigeria voters across the divide (North-South) before the March 2015 presidential election?*

A Summary of KI Responses (a). Emergence of Goodluck Jonathan, an *Ijaw-Christian* as consensus presidential candidate of PDP to contest for the office of the President of Federal Republic in 2015. (b). Campaign of resentment of Jonathan's second-term ambition and support for a *Muslim- Northerner* by Ango Abdullahi-led *Northern Elders Forum*, NEF to become president in 2015. (c). Campaign of support and advocacy for Jonathan's second-term presidential ambition by Tanko Yakassi-led *Northern Elders Council*, NEC. (d). Emergence of Muhammadu Buhari, a *Fulani-Muslim* as a candidate of All Progressive Congress, APC (an alliance of ACN, CPC, ANPP, a faction of APGA and New PDP). (e). Nomination of Yemi Osinbajo, a *Yoruba-Christian pastor* of a popular Pentecostal Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, RCCG as a running mate of presidential candidate of All Progressive Congress, APC, Buhari. (f). Press conference of support and advocacy for candidate of APC, Buhari by *Arewa Consultative Forum*. (g). Jonathan visit to the prayer convention of Redeemed Christian Church of God, RCCG to solicit for support of Christian brethren. (h). The support and call for prayers across churches in the country by the leadership of *Christian Association of Nigeria*, CAN for the electoral victory of a brethren, Goodluck Jonathan. (i). Rev Father Ejike Mbaka's 31st December, 2014 message declaring support for Muhammadu Buhari, candidate of APC. (j). Special Friday *Jummat prayers*

across *Mosques* in states of Katsina and Kaduna for *Allah's* blessings and grace for the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari. (k). Press Conferences of support and endorsement of Goodluck Jonathan second-term presidential bid by *Ohaneze Ndigbo*, *Ijaw National Congress*, South-South General Assembly and *Afenifere* of Yoruba. (l) An *Igbo* name of '*Okechukwu Ndigbo*' given to Buhari by Governor of Imo state, Rochas Okorocha in attempt to solicit for support from Ndigbo occasioned by advocacy remarks by Ogbonnaya Onu that the *interest of Ndigbo* will be protected in APC national government. (m). Jonathan visit to Ooni of Ife and other prominent Yoruba traditional rulers in Osun, Lagos and Oyo states to solicit for support of the royal fathers and correct the regional narrative that "*his government sidelined Yoruba people...*" (n). Inflammatory remarks by Nasir-El-Rufia, a *Fulani-Muslim* and Deputy National Secretary of APC in a press interview. (o). Inflammatory statement by Asari Dokubo leader of Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force in a press interview.

KI Question: *Do you consider ethno-religious identity a very significant issue among Nigeria voters before the 2019 presidential election?*

A Summary of KI Responses: To a significant extent amid other narratives or issues like recessive national economy, Fulani-herders-farmers' conflict, Buhari's health issue and poor national governance performance, heightened Boko Haram insurgency occasioned with the onslaught of Islamic Province of West African State, ISWAP, state recovery of stolen funds and properties by EFCC, IPOB insurrectional threats, widespread banditry and abduction of school children across states in North-West and North-Central, etc.

KI Question: *What were the ethno-religious sentiments and narratives shared by Nigeria voters across the divide (North-South) before the February 2019 presidential election?*

A Summary of KI Responses: (a). That Buhari is more akin to the interest of *Fulani nationality* than other ethnic nationalities in the North. (b). That *Yoruba people* (except the office of the Vice President) has not been fully integrated in Buhari's government despite the support of the region in 2015 presidential election. (c). That Buhari will handover power to a *Yoruba* after his second tenure. (d). That Atiku Abubakar will facilitate the actualization of *Igbo Presidency* by the choice of Peter Obi as the running mate. (e). That Buhari marginalized *Ndigbo* in his government. (f). That support for Buhari's second-tenure bid will hasten the realization of Nigeria President of *Igbo* extraction in 2023. (g). That *Fulani* herdsman-farmers' conflict is a ploy to Islamize and fulanize Christian indigenous communities and farm-settlements in *ethnic minorities* of North-Central and Niger Delta and, *Igbo states*. (h). That Atiku Abubakar is a moderate *Fulani-Muslim* with contacts and partisan structures across regions, *ethnic and religious* divides.

KI Question: *What were the factors that boosted ethno-religious sentiments and narratives shared by Nigeria voters across the divide (North-South) before February 2019 presidential election?*

A Summary of KI Responses (a). Press conference of support and endorsement of Atiku Abubakar' presidential ambition by *Northern Elders Political Forum*, NEPL. (b). Press conference of support and endorsement of Buhari's second-tenure ambition by Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria, MACBAN and Fulani Nationality Movement. (c). Press statement of support and endorsement of presidential bid of Atiku Abubakar by Ohaneze Ndigbo. (d). Press conference of support and endorsement of

presidential ambition of Atiku Abubakar by *Afenifere*. (e). Declared support for Buhari’s second- tenure by *Arewa* Consultative Forum. (f). Support and endorsement of Buhari/Osinbajo presidential bid by a factional *Afenifere*. (g). Buhari’s visit to Obi of Onitsha and meeting with South-East leaders to solicit for the support of *Ndigbo* and correct the regional narrative that his government marginalized *Ndigbo*. (h). Atiku’s meeting with leadership, *Aka-Ikenga* and Youth Wing of Ohaneze *Ndigbo* and South-East traditional rulers to solicit for support and vote of the region. (i). Many Pentecostal pastors campaigned for Atiku in their churches across southern regions and Middle-Belt of northern minorities. (j). Peter Obi’s visit to Catholic Adoration Ministry of Rev. Father Ejike Mbaka at Enugu to solicit for prayers and support of Christian Worshippers (k). Governor of Kano State, Abdullahi Ganduje and Senator Hope Uzodinma’s visit to Catholic Adoration Ministry of Rev. Father Ejike Mbaka at Enugu to solicit for prayers and support of Christian congregants for the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari (l). The resentment of Buhari’s second-tenure bid by a *Muslim Cleric* Sheikh Abubakar Ahamd Gumim at Kaduna. (m) Yemi Osinbajo’s call for prayers and support from Christian brothers for Buhari’s second-tenure bid at National Ecumenical Center, Abuja. (n). Special *Jummat* prayer at National Mosque, Abuja for the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari and Yemi Osinbajoo. (o). *Eid Zakat* for *Muslim ummah* and prayers across Mosques in Adamawa state for the electoral victory of Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi.

Table 1.2: THE POLITICAL PARTY, ETHNO-RELIGIOUS AND REGIONAL BACKGROUND OF FRONTLINE CANDIDATES IN 2011, 2015 AND 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

Frontline Presidential Candidates in 16th April Election, 2011				
Candidate	Political Party	State/Ethnic Nationality	Religion	Geo-Political Zone
Goodluck Jonathan	PDP	Bayelsa/Ijaw	Christian	South-South
MuhammaduBuhari	CPC	Katsina/Fulani	Muslim	North-West
Nuhu Ribadu	ACN	Adamawa/Fulani	Muslim	North-East
Ibrahim Shekaru	ANPP	Kano/Hausa	Muslim	North-West
Frontline Presidential Candidates in 28th March Election, 2015				
Candidate	Political Party	State/Ethnic Nationality	Religion	Geo-Political Zone
Goodluck Jonathan	PDP	Bayelsa/Ijaw	Christian	South-South
MuhammaduBuhari	APC	Katsina/Fulani	Muslim	North-West
Frontline Presidential Candidates in 23rd February Election, 2019				
Candidate	Political Party	State/Ethnic Nationality	Religion	Geo-Political Zone
MuhammaduBuhari	APC	Katsina/Fulani	Muslim	North-West
Atiku Abubakar	PDP	Adamawa/Chamba-Fulani	Muslim	North-East

Source: Researcher’s compilation.

It is therefore pertinent to interpret and analyze these data presented from Key Informant interviewees and documentary sources to accentuate the significance or

insignificance of ethno-religious identity in the voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections.

Data Interpretation and Analysis

The responses of the Key Informants revealed that ethno-religious identity was a very significant issue of national discourse amid other narratives shared and expressed among most Nigeria electorate in the voter environment of a presidential election. Also, the responses of the Key Informants revealed peculiarities of ethno-religious issues and events informing voter's euphoria, perception, sentiments and value for candidates of frontline political parties who shared their ethno-religious inclinations in 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections.

Emphatically, most of the Key Informant interviewees argued that these ethno-religious primordial awareness and narratives stemmed from the cleavage politics of North-South divide. One of the Key Informant pointedly said, "...there are issues you cannot ignore in this country especially in a national election. One of them is issue of 'where you come from?' What is your faith and tribe? So for us, that issue is very important because of how we find ourselves as a people from different background and, inherent struggles and injustice among us. We are therefore interested in the faith and tribe of who holds the flag of a political party in a presidential election. This statement is further evinced by another comment, Yes, there are other issues but the issue of ethnicity and religion of a candidate standing for a presidential election is also very important among the voters...., concluded by one of the Key Informant respondents.

In the voter environment of 2011, most of the Key Informants opined that there were several factors exacerbating ethno-religious narratives (as presented) among the Nigeria electorate. First was the death of Yar Adua in May 2010 and politics of rotational presidency in PDP which heightened power contestation between the South and North towards 2011 presidential election.

Yar'Adua, a Fulani-Muslim was elected and sworn in as the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on 29th May, 2007. However, two years later, he died, precisely on 5th May, 2010 after suffering from acute *pericarditis* (an inflammation of the sac surrounding the heart). His death sparked off divisive interests and alliances in the politics of rotation of power in the ruling Peoples Democratic Party, PDP. Thus, Liyel Imoke, Governor, Cross River State and chairman, South-South Governor's Forum hosted a regional summit at Port Harcourt, Rivers state in July, 2010 which issued 13-point communiqué with unanimous call on Goodluck Jonathan to formally declare his interest in the 2011 presidential election and call on other zones to support him. In a related development, there was a meeting of Northern Governors' Forum in August, 2010 on zoning where 10 Executive Governors (Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Niger, Kwara, Kano, Kebbi, Katsina, Sokoto and Jigawa) supported zoning while 7 Executive Governors (Adamawa, Benue, Kogi, Plateau, Kaduna, Nassarawa and Taraba) did not support zoning of the office of the president to the North rather maintained that any person can aspire to occupy the office of the president where Zamfara and Bauchi state governors were absent. However, the absence and interest of Isa Yuguda of Bauchi state at the event was not clear then because during the saga of ill-health of Yar Adua, he was considered as possible replacement for

him. He married one of the daughters of the late president as a fourth wife before his demise. A communiqué was later issued at the end of the meeting which reads that “..the Northern Governor’s Forum acknowledge the right of president Goodluck Jonathan and indeed any other Nigerian to legitimately and constitutionally contest for the office of the president...” as documented by a Key Informant. It further implied that majority of the northern chief executives irrespective of their party affiliation wanted a *Muslim*-northerner to succeed late Yar Adua in 2011.

Subsequently, Key Informants recalled that Adamu Ciroma, a northern PDP Chieftain authored a petition to the national leadership of Peoples Democratic Party raising serious concerns on the implications of violation of PDP zoning principle and the need for a northerner to be nominated as a presidential candidate in the scheduled January 2011 presidential primaries. Similarly, the Northern Leaders Political Forum, NLPF led by Adamu Ciroma, a political pressure group in defence of Northern interest also re-echo the dilemma of Northern politicians in PDP and presented Atiku as a consensus candidate from the North to complete the presidency of late Yar Adua. In essence, Key Informants disclosed that the charisma and cult followership of Muhammadu Buhari became increasingly unprecedented and overwhelming as seen in thousands of people that troop to his campaign rallies in Borno, Bauchi, Gombe, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto and Kebbi states with significant population of *Fulani* communities.

In reaction to this development, the leadership of *Ijaw* National Congress which has unwittingly remained inactive suddenly begin to show enthusiasm to support the presidential ambition of an illustrious, son Jonathan through road-walks and press statements occasioned by media advocacy by the Conference of Ethnic Nationalities in Niger Delta led by Prof. Koko in support of the presidential ambition of Goodluck Jonathan as babble out by Key Informants. Similarly, Ohaneze Ndigbo threw its weight behind Jonathan’s presidential bid. However, this support was stridently condemned by a cross section of Igbo political elite who argued that the Igbo social-cultural organization, Ohaneze should remain neutral in national politics and argued that Jonathan has taken *Ndigbo* for granted and has not meet them with any concrete offers. It was later discovered that these critics resonated from the Camp of Atiku in the South East. For instance, Senator Ben Obi, (a former senator from Anambra state and presidential running mate of Atiku Abubakar in 2007) was appointed the Director-General of the Amalgamated Atiku Abubakar Presidential Campaign Organization, AAAPCO and was likely to be nominated as presidential running mate had been Atiku clinched PDP presidential ticket as a replacement of Yar Adua as disclosed by Key Informants. Atiku later contested against Goodluck Jonathan in a presidential primary election of PDP televised live in NTA and other private televisions. The victory of Goodluck Jonathan sparked off widespread celebration in states of South-South and South-East which were predominantly Christian inclined. This development as embellished by Key Informants further reinforced press conference of support and endorsement of CPC candidate, Buhari by the leadership of *Arewa* Consultative Forum. For the Forum, Buhari’s interest in the presidential race served as a ‘consolation’ to the injustice done to the North by the ruling Peoples Democratic Party by failing to adhere to the provision of zoning as enunciated in the party constitution.

Obviously, the issue of PDP violation of zoning principle later became a topical issue among Nigerians as Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri, Yoruba, Igbo, Ijaw on the streets, political forum, church etc. Key Informants also revealed the religious imperatives of this unfolding event when Goodluck Jonathan periodically visit different Pentecostal churches on Sunday services at Abuja publicizing the strides recorded by his administration as acting and substantive president after the death of his principal, what he intends to do if elected and solicited for support and prayers from the Christian brothers and sisters. In contrary, the entrance of Pastor Tunde Bakare, a very popular preacher of the gospel of *Christ Jesus* as running mate of Buhari known as religious bigot among *Christian* population undoubtedly changed the narrative as observed by a Key Informant. We were amazed by the development considering the negative things said about the CPC candidate on religion and a respected preacher of the gospel of Christ accepting to stand as his running mate.....it gave us 'something' to reflect on as regarding religious tolerance in politics, love for one another as admonished in the holy scripture and the need to look forward for a better and united country, said a Key Informant. On the contrary, some Key Informants emphasized that despite the value of religious identity of Tunde Bakare as a pastor but he has no political clout among the *Yoruba* people. Again, the Congress for Progressive Change, CPC as a party has no partisan relevance in a mixed religious region where Bola Tinubu's Action Congress of Nigeria hold sway. This development therefore accentuates the imperatives of party identification in ethno-religious euphoria, interest and alliances.

To this end, Key Informants reminisce that after the primary elections in January, 2011, chairman of PDP Governor's Forum, Godswill Akpabio of Awka Ibom state, chairman Nigeria Governor's Forum, Chibuike Ameachi of Rivers State, and chairman, South-South Governors' Forum, Liyel Imoke led other Governors of South-South region (except Adams Oshiomhole of Edo state and member of ACN) to declare their support for Goodluck Jonathan and urged voters in South-South region and Nigerians to vote for him. In a similar situation, the chairman of South-East Governor's Forum led by Governor Ikedi Ohakim of Imo state also called *Ndigbo* to vote for Goodluck as *a brother across the Niger*. In a dramatic move, the CPC campaign team leveraging on Buhari's cult followership and PDP violation of zoning principle had in public events solicited for the support of Northern *Muslims*, *Fulani* and *Hausa* communities in states of North-West and North-East for '*power to return back to the region*'. These events in their respective dimensions and scale as revealed by the Key Informant interviewees informed narratives and prejudices of millions of Nigeria voters in the voter environment of 2011 presidential election.

Suffice to note that the public euphoria and national discourse on identity personalities of Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari occasioned by divisive narrative of zoning (its rationality and constitutionality) diminished the events and value of the other two frontline candidates, Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau of ANPP and Nuhu Ribadu of ACN. Most of the Key Informants held that the much-talk-about zoning issue in PDP, Jonathan, a Nigerian president from *Ijaw* ethnic minority and anger of the North to support Mohammadu Buhari, a *Fulani-Muslim* (ex-general officer commanding, GOC, Third Armoured Division, Jos, 1981-1983 and former head of state, 1983-1985) dwarfed electoral value of Shekarau and Ribadu across ethno-religious identities of Nigeria regions.

To further illustrate, the index of the first column of Table 1.2. showed that there were three frontline candidates from the same region, North and symmetrical ethnic nationalities (Hausa/Fulani) and shared the same faith, Islam. Again Mohammodu Buhari of Congress for Progressive Change, CPC and Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau of All Nigeria Peoples Party, ANPP are *Muslims* from Katsina and Kano states in the North-West region while Nuhu Ribadu is also a *Muslim* from Adamawa state in the North-East region. On the other hand, the only southern candidate and incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan is from *Ijaw* ethnic minority in Bayelsa state in a predominantly *Christian* South-South region. As earlier noted, the death of President Umaru Musa YarAdua in 2010, the regional narrative for a Northerner to complete late Yar Adua's presidency and violation of PDP zoning formula were factors which may have influenced emergence of three frontline candidates from the north to challenge the candidate of Peoples Democratic Party, PDP in the April presidential election of 2011.

In the voter environment of 2015 presidential election, the Key Informant interviewees noted pointedly that ethno-religious sentiment and narratives among the millions of Nigeria voters for the two frontline candidates was intense and, to a very significant extent as embellished by several factors. First was the stout resistance from *Fulani-Muslim* elite who openly challenged Jonathan's interest in 2015 presidential race. The resistance was seen in incessant strident comments by a cross section of Northern elite in public events....why should Jonathan take the entire region for a ride? Why should the North be mocked because of its leniency to cede power to the south....? We are ready and ready to return power to the North as noted by some Key Informants. In a similar sense, Northern Elders Forum, NEF a socio-political interest group led by Ango Abdullahi provided cohesive platform for regional dysphoria of Jonathan's interest in second-term bid through media press statements and advocacy visits to the elite in the North. Interestingly, what seem to be a dissent northern view on Goodluck Jonathan presidential bid was obviously observed in a press conference and communiqué issued by Tanko Yakassi-led Northern Elders Council, NEC calling on the region, *north* to support and vote for Jonathan/Sambo for second tenure in office on the premise that the administration has done well for the region and entire nation through the *Transformation Agenda* of the federal government. Alhaji Tanko Yakassi in a press interview also outlined the achievements of the administration and concluded that Goodluck Jonathan has done well to deserve second term in office beyond any primordial sentiments.

Furthermore, there was another divisive *identity narrative* written in native languages printed in thousands of pamphlets given to many people in various states of the North. This narrative in Hausa and Fulfulde languages translated reads, 'that Jonathan failed to honour agreement of single-term which is an act of treachery and spat on the region...'. This development undoubtedly infuriated millions of Northern voters especially from *Fulani-Muslim* who conceived Jonathan's cynical interest in presidency for two-terms after the death of Yar Adua, as a trend that should be resolutely condemned and resisted. Expectedly, there were widespread inflammatory campaign of hate in Mosques, political rallies and other social events precipitated by the politicians from opponent, APC a new party alliance in connivance with aggrieved members of PDP in most states across the North. In April, 2014, a Memo to the Northern Governors' Forum titled, *On-Going Full-*

Fledged Genocide in Northern Nigeria by Murtala Nyako, the Governor of Adamawa state was publicized which accused Goodluck Jonathan administration for deliberately allowing the carnage of Boko Haram onslaught to exterminate the North and pave way for southern dominance. Hence, some of the elite of the North conceived Boko Haram insurgency as a ploy by the southern elite to destabilize the security and economy of the region.

In a related development, Muhammadu Buhari emerged as the flag bearer of All Progressive Congress and, *Arewa* Consultative Forum immediately endorsed his presidential bid as “*candidate for the North*” and urged the region to massively vote for him. Expectedly, special *Jummat* prayers were held on Friday across Northern Nigeria particularly in Katsina and Kaduna states for the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari, candidate of APC. Beyond, *Jummat* prayers, another dimension of religious intensiveness was observed when a group known as *Alliance for Muslim Faithful* storm streets of Zaria in Kaduna and, later sighted in Bunza in Kebbi state including Tarauni, Gezawa and Bunkure in Kano state advocating for *Nigerian Muslim president* in 2015 presidential election. The message of the group was later heard as a Radio *jingle* which dominated the air waves across some states in the North. Interestingly, Rev Father Ejike Mbaka’s 31st December 2014 message was the last stroke that breaks the Camel’s back. In the message, the fiery Catholic priest prophesied before thousands of Christian worshippers at the Adoration prayer ground in Enugu that God has rejected Goodluck Jonathan as he has rejected King Saul of Israel in the Holy Scripture that Muhammadu Buhari has been anointed to be the next president of Nigeria! The audio message of Rev Father Ejike Mbaka was later translated in Hausa and Fulfulde languages and sold in thousand copies in Kano, Kaduna, Katsina and other states of the North as revealed by Key Informant respondents.

Basically, this wide spreading sectional consciousness in power transition invariably resonated activism and drive of concerned Fulani elite to call for support and mobilization for Muhammadu Buhari’s presidential ambition. The call was also extended to influential Fulani persons in neighboring countries in West Africa to mobilize funds and logistics for campaign and electoral victory of a national charismatic personality in Africa largest country, Nigeria as revealed by Key Informant participants. Hence, the entire region, north became intensely engulfed with stout resentment against Jonathan’s ambition for power in 2015 presidential election. This is also demonstrated in hoodlums attacks on presidential convoy and members of PDP Presidential Campaign Council on a state rally at Bauchi, Katsina and Adamawa where vehicle windscreens were smashed and persons sustained different degree of injuries.

Remarkably, this Northern euphoria of resentment was also extended to the Western Nigeria of *Yoruba* ethnic nationality of mixed religious identities. Key Informants embellished that that the emergence of APC was facilitated by the alliance talk between Buhari and Asiwaju Bola Tinubu, national leader of defunct Action Congress of Nigeria. Thus, it was a regional alliance between the North and West which was prompted by the failure of Jonathan administration to ensure more inclusion of Yoruba persons in his government. In this vein, most of the Key Informants argued that Goodluck Jonathan administration marginalized the Yoruba region in federal appointments (both political and statutory) which endeared Buhari’s ‘mantra of change’ in the minds of most Yoruba

people. This is further demonstrated by myriad of endorsements of Pan Yoruba Socio-cultural Associations except the leadership of *Afenifere* through the support of Governor of Ondo State, Olusegun Mimiko which threw its weight behind the presidential ambition of Goodluck Jonathan. However, as observed many *Yoruba* people across *Muslim-Christian* divide were enthused by the identity background of Professor Yemi Osinbajo, a district pastor at the Redeemed Christian Church of God, RCCG. Leveraging on the disaffection between a cross section of political elite of Yoruba and Goodluck's administration on regional marginalization in national appointments, a Key Informant remarked that, '*the APC leadership made valid permutation for the nomination of Yemi Osinbajo as Buhari running mate in view of the total votes of PDP's stronghold (South-South, South-East and North-Central) is put at 28 million voters which represent about 39 percent-Buhari's popularity in the North-West and North-East occasioned with Tinubu's perceived influence in South-West has the potential to net in about 45 million votes during the election which represents 60 percent of the 74 million registered voters*'. And, the *Christian* background of Buhari's running mate Osinbajo was also appealing to Christian communities in the West and Middle-Belt.

Variably, Key Informants noted that the events in the North and West stimulated developments against interest of Goodluck Jonathan. Expectedly, the *Ijaw* National Congress, the South-South General Assembly, Ohaneze Ndigbo, *Afenifere* and other regional affiliations in South-South and South-East regions through press conferences threw their weight of support for Goodluck Jonathan's ambition. Recall before the endorsement, Governor of Ondo state, Olusegun Mimiko had in December, 2013 led the delegation of *Afenifere* leadership on a state visit to Jonathan eulogizing his administration's decision to organize a national dialogue. In the case of *Afenifere's* support for Jonathan, *most Yoruba people however argued that the socio-cultural organization, Afenifere does not speak for Yoruba people. That the people of South-West irrespective of diversity in religious inclinations have already know whom to support and vote* as revealed by Key Informant respondents. This development further spurred regional awareness rallies across states of South-East and South-South states urging *Ndigbo* and southern ethnic minorities to wake up to challenge what was described as "*Northern allied resentment against Goodluck's ambition in 2015 presidential election*". In attempt to bolster the electoral value of Muhammadu Buhari among *Ndigbo*, Key Informant participants noted that the chairman of Progressive Governors' Forum, Rochas Okorochoa at event of presidential rally in Owerri, Imo state capital for Buhari/Osinbajo ticket declared before thousands of party faithful that Muhammadu Buhari's regional name is "*Okechukwu ndigbo*" which impliedly indicate that Muhammadu Buhari represents resonance of optimism between the North and *Ndigbo* for the actualization of Nigeria President of South-East extraction after his 8 years tenure. In effort to correct the narrative that All Progressive Congress, APC is a *Islamist* political party like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a south-east party chieftain of APC, Ogbonnaya Onu maintained through a press interview that the party is all-inclusive platform where the interest of *Ndigbo* will be protected.

To underscore the vehemence of religious influence towards March 2015 presidential election, Key Informants indicated that the leadership of Christian Association of Nigeria led by its President, Pastor Ayo Oritsajafor (from Delta State) endorsed presidential

ambition of Goodluck Jonathan and called on *Christians* in North and South to vote for him. This development was also followed by Goodluck's visit to the prayer convention or conference of Redeemed Christian Church of God, RCCG where he knelt and received prayers and blessings from Pastor Adebayo. Then after, he spoke to the congregation and solicited for their support. Similarly, there was a popular narrative "*Buhari's Islamization agenda*" expressed and shared by many Christians across the divide particularly in the Middle-Belt, South-South and South-East of Nigeria which was roundly condemned despite APC appeal for support of its Muslim/Christian ticket.

Acknowledging the strategic importance of *Yoruba* region to his electoral victory in 2011, lost of massive goodwill among the elite and people of the region and protracted intra-party dissensions in virtually all the PDP state executives of the South-West, Jonathan in February, 2015 visited Ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuwade; Oba of Lagos, Oba Rilwanu Babatunde Akiolu 1, Oba Babatunde Akran, the Aholun of Badagry and other prominent traditional rulers in Osun and Oyo. Jonathan's message was explicit.....*to ask for royal blessings, seek for the support of the Yoruba people and correct what he described as erroneous narrative that his government marginalized Yoruba region in political appointments* as disclosed by Key Informants.

In addition, Key Informants also noted that the lopsided distribution of Permanent Voters Cards, PVC across states and regions of the Federation created so much regional suspicion, tension and anxiety across the divides which consequently led to the postponement of the election for six weeks. In this tensed situation, South-South elder statesman, Edwin Clark granted a press interview where he accused Professor Jega, chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC of connivance with his kinsmen from the North and APC to rig the 2015 presidential election in favour of Buhari. This press statement was further preceded by threat remarks by the Deputy, National Secretary of All Progressive Congress, APC, Mallam El-Rufai who said in a press interview, 'that 2015 election may be followed by violence across the country as it happened in Nigeria's first republic and even in 2011 if the conduct of the poll is not free and fair'. He was later invited, questioned and detained for several hours by the personnel of Department of State Security, DSS for the inciting remarks. Similarly, Asari Dokubo, leader of Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force also told Journalists that the current insecurity and tension in the country would be a child's play if President Goodluck Jonathan fail to win second-term in 2015.

These inciting statements consequently heightened national and regional apprehension raising serious concerns in the existence and continuity of Nigeria as a country after 2015 presidential election. The political climate was very intense with divisive ethno-religious events, sentiments and narratives across the divides before the March 28, 2015 presidential election.

Subsequently, the index of the second column of Table 1.2 showed the resilience of the APC candidate, Buhari whose charisma was visibly significant across the three regions of the North and incumbent presidential candidate of ruling PDP, Jonathan whose personality identity was permissible among millions of Nigeria voters in the South. The cleavage background of these frontline candidates occasioned by ethno-religious divisive narratives and dispositions elicited intense regional intrigues, realignments, campaign of

hate and hostilities before the March 2015 presidential election. In the voter environment of 2015, the euphoria of ethno-religious narratives and sentiment displayed among Nigerians for the two frontline candidates was significantly high to what was experienced or observed in the voter environment of 2011 presidential election.

In the voter environment of 2019 presidential election, Key Informant interviewees opined that ethno-religious sentiments and narratives shared among millions of Nigeria voters remarkably resonate from the identity background of presidential running mates of the two frontline candidates. Interestingly, the index of the third column of Table 1.2 presented two frontline candidates from different partisan platforms but who were from the same region (North), and, share symmetrical ethnic nationality identity, *Fulani/Chamba* and faith, *Islam*. Buhari, the incumbent president and APC candidate is from Katsina state and *Fulani* in North-Western region of Islamic religious identity as earlier noted. On the other hand, Buhari's major contender, Atiku Abubakar, the candidate of PDP, is a *Muslim* from Chamba ethnic minority in predominantly *Fulani* community and mixed religious state, Adamawa in North-East region (Appendix I and Appendix 2). Hence, the emergence of Atiku as a candidate of a dominant opponent political party, PDP represents a penitence strategy of Peoples Democratic Party to pacify the North (elite and voters) after the violation of established zoning formula in 2011 and 2015 presidential elections. This development further underscored the importance of identity consideration of "*who emerge as a candidate of a political party*" in a presidential election in Nigeria.

Emphatically, the Atiku's ceaseless interest to serve as Nigeria leader first got approval and support of Northern Elders Political Forum, NEPL. This regional interest group has remained consistent since 2011 in promoting the positive virtues of *Turaki Adamawa*, Atiku Abubakar as a moderate *Muslim* and a pan-Nigerian politician with contacts and partisan structures across the thirty-six states of the Federation and FCT as argued by Key Informants. Furthermore, Key Informant interviewees revealed that the presidential running mates of APC and PDP, Yemi Osinbajo and Peter Obi shared regional and religious identities as Southern and *Christian* but differentiated in ethnic identity as *Yoruba* and *Igbo*. Remarkable in this development was the candidacy of Peter Obi whose ethno-religious identity as *Igbo-Christian* was overwhelmingly received across states of South-East and South-South as disclosed by most of the Key Informants. Hence, Key Informants revealed that this situation prompted the endorsement of PDP presidential candidate, Atiku for the 2019 presidential election by the Ohaneze Ndigbo. The Pan-Igbo socio-cultural association, Ohaneze Ndigbo urged Igbo indigenes in South-East and other parts of Nigeria to vote for Atiku whose running mate is "our brother, Peter Obi from Anambra state". Atiku later met Obi of Onitsha, South-East Traditional Rulers' Forum, *Aka-Ikenga* and Youth Wing of Ohaneze Ndigbo and Igbo elder statesmen, Prof. Ben Nwabueze and Chief Mbazulike Amechi and solicited for the support of *Ndigbo* in the 2019 presidential election with a pledge to work towards *Nigeria President of Igbo extraction* after his presidency in 2027. It was a reassuring pledge and, Atiku/Obi joint ticket was overwhelmingly accepted and seen as *Igbo project* in the 2019 presidential election. This optimism was also shared by ethnic minorities of South-South region. On the other hand, APC candidate and incumbent president, Muhammadu Buhari and party stalwarts met Obi of Onitsha and South-East traditional rulers at Anambra state received royal blessings,

solicited for the support of *Ndigbo* and argued that his government did not marginalized people of South-East rather *appointments are on the basis of merit and competence*. This comment, a Key Informant disclosed, made many to wonder *whether there is no competent Igbo person across five states in the South-East to be appointed to serve in statutory and political offices of Buhar's government*. Subsequently, Key Informants also illuminate the religious imperatives which cannot be ignored in this ethnic euphoria, the *Christian* population in South-East and South-South still perceived APC as a *Muslim political party* as Peter Obi visited Pentecostal church service and banzaa event of Catholic churches including Adoration Prayer Ministry of Rev. Father Ejike Mbaka where he solicited for support and prayers from the *Christian* congregants for electoral victory in 2019 presidential election. Similarly, many Pentecostal pastors in South-South, South-East and Northern minorities campaigned openly for Atiku and urged their members to go and get their permanent Voters Cards, PVC.

Remarkably, Key Informants revealed that *Afenifere* group declared support for Atiku/Obi ticket while break-away faction *Afenifere* endorsed Buhari/Osinbajo ticket. On the other hand, Professor Osinbajo also visited Ooni of Ife, Alake of Abeokuta and paramount traditional rulers in Yoruba solicited for support of his kinsmen with a pledge that *Buhari will hand over power to the West after his presidency in 2023*. The incumbent Vice President and presidential running mate of APC also solicited for prayers, support and blessings from the *Christian* community at National Ecumenical Center, Abuja for the 2019 presidential election. Subsequently, some leading Pan-Fulani Associations threw their weight of support for the APC candidate, Buhari against Atiku, a Chamba-Fulani from North-East. Hence, Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria, MACBAN and *Fulani* Nationality Movement in different press conference events endorsed APC candidate and urged *Fulani* people in every part of Nigeria to support and vote for Buhari's second-term presidential bid in 2019 election. In a similar sense, *Arewa* Consultative Forum also endorsed presidential ambition of APC candidate.

In reference to religious imperatives, Key Informants noted that special *Jummat* prayer was organized at National Mosque, Abuja for the electoral victory of Buhari and Osinbajo in the February 2019 presidential election. Also, the same trend was also observed in Central Mosque Yola and, other district Sunni Mosques in Adamawa for the electoral victory of Atiku and Peter Obi in February, 2019 presidential election. This development was also followed by *Eid Zakat* for *Muslim ummah* by Friends of Atiku, FA in support of presidential ambition of PDP candidate. On the other hand, Governor of Kano state, Abdullahi Ganduje and Senator Hope Uzodimna of Imo state visited Adoration prayer ground, Enugu solicited prayers and support from the Catholic priest, Rev Father Ejike Mbaka and the *Christian* congregants for re-election bid of Muhammadu Buhari, APC candidate. In a dissent view, popular and fiery *Islamic* Cleric, Sheikh Abubakar Ahamd Gumi at Kaduna told *Muslim Ummah* that Buhari's government does not deserved second chance because many Nigerians have lost their lives and livelihood contrary to *Allah's* expectations for unity, progress and development of Nigeria.

Most importantly, Key Informants stressed that there is a *popular narrative* currently shared among Christians and ethnic nationalities in North-Central, Yoruba South-West, *Ndigbo* in South-East and ethnic minorities of South-South against APC led government.

The *popular narrative* is that *'the ongoing carnage of armed Fulani herders against indigenous communities and farm settlements is a ploy to fulanize and Islamize Middle-Belt and Southern Nigeria'*. This sentiment was a widespread narrative in the voter environment of 2019 presidential election especially among Christian communities across these regions in view of obvious failure and redundancy of the Fulani-led national government to abate the ugly situation as revealed and argued by the Key Informants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusively, from the responses of the Key Informant interviewees and empirical data, issues of ethno-religious identity amid other narratives are very significant in the voter environment of Nigerian presidential election. And, it is also discovered that issues revolving around ethno-religious identity often resonate from identity background of candidates of frontline political parties (PDP, CPC and APC) and identity principle regulating transition to power (PDP zoning policy). To this end, ethno-religious identity of a presidential candidate is a very significant issue in the voter environment of a presidential election. More appropriately, millions of Nigeria voters across the divide are always conscious of ethno-religious identity of *"who become a candidate of a frontline political party"* in the voter environment of a presidential election.

Subsequently, there were peculiar issues exacerbating ethno-religious sentiments in voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections as embellished. These issues ranges from the death of former president, Alhaji Yar Adua to politics of rotational presidency in PDP to Goodluck Jonathan's ambition to contest in 2015 presidential election including emergence of a cross-regional alliance platform, APC where Buhari became the presidential candidate to the ethno-religious value of Osinbajo and Obi in 2019 presidential election amid other identity narratives. To this extent, frontline political parties in Nigeria presidential election are sensitive of regional and ethno-religious background of their candidates and running mates in voter environment of a presidential election. Hence, " the hypothetical assumption that "ethno-religious identity was a significant issue in the voter environments of 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections is established".

The recommendations derive relevance from the findings and conclusions of this study. First Ethno-religious identity is a strong identity expression in Nigeria presidential politics and elections as observed. This is not strange*nothing is wrong when one identifies himself as Fulani-Muslim, Igbo-Christian, Yoruba-Christian or Muslim, Ebirá-Muslim or Christian, Eggon-Christian or Muslim nor Bade-Christian or Muslim*. Identity defines 'who we are'. Beside the popular euphoria for ethno-religious issues in voter environment of a presidential election, Nigeria voters across the divides should also show reasonable interests in issues of national governance expectations such as security, economy, candidate's credibility and drive, etc. Most importantly, the principle of power rotation (which political parties have failed to adhere) should be enshrined in 1999 Federal Republic Constitution in acknowledgement of our diversity and failures as a people in attempt to entrench sense of nation-building in power succession.

In addition, the 'absurdity of identity' is when it is deliberately manipulated as a centrifugal tendency to incite hatred against another region, ethnic group and faith for purpose of partisan interests and gains. This vice is common in the campaign of Nigerian

presidential elections and can be effectively addressed through strict enforcement of presidential campaign guidelines by the Independent National Electoral Commission and proposed National Electoral Offense Commission. This measure can also be facilitated by the advocacy of inter-ethnic councils of Nigeria traditional rulers and inter-faith council of Nigeria religious leaders. This has become pertinent to alleviate regional and ethno-religious tension often experienced in the voter environment of presidential elections in Nigeria.

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