

An Examination of Ethno-Religious Influences on Political Behaviour and Governance in Nigeria

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[0205] Abstract

The paper examines the relationship between politics and ethno-religious, highlighting its potential impacts on the Nigerian political system. It reflected on the recurrent incidences of ethno-religious divide within the Nigerian body politics. The study is anchored on the Social Identity Theory to explain how individuals or groups derive part of the identity from the irreligious affiliation, leading them to favour political actors and policies that align with their religious group's interests. Voting behaviour, recruitment processes, placements, and political appointments into sensitive positions are often influenced and determined by ethno-religious factors in Nigeria. Data for the paper were drawn from secondary sources. Investigations conducted revealed that measures such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), the National Orientation Agency (NOA), and the Peace Accord by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were put in place to enhance peace and encourage unity in a religiously and culturally diverse country. However, these efforts have been largely undermined by the neo-patrimonialism behaviour of patron-client's actions and policies that have failed to promote social mobilization and national unity in Nigeria. The study asserts that religious leaders have significantly failed to positively influence government decisions for the benefit of the entire Nigerians. It is here by recommended that religious leaders must not engage in the unsavory attitude of endorsement of political candidates and also imposing such candidates on their members to vote, rather they should deal with in internal divisions within their own communities through speaking out against injustice and promoting peace in their domain. The religious leaders should divorce themselves from unnecessary relationship with government and politicians which normally will lead to unfair compromise. To achieve a peaceful and sustainable democratic society, the government must desist from all forms of patronage, covert or overt, that create avenues for a privileged few to manipulate the polity for their personal interests.

Keywords: Behavioral Conduct, Corruption, Politics, Political Elites, Religion

Introduction

Much like in many climes, ethno-religious no doubt appears to be one of the most debatable social phenomena in the world. The discourse on the influence of ethno-religious largely stems from the fact that global efforts have tried to devised a means to developed its distinctive orientation towards all aspects of social life. There are several assumptions concerning the separation of ethno-religious from politics. But how ever convincing some of these assumptions may appear to be, or should not forget the fact that for most social formation in human history, politics, ethnicity and religion have existed and operated hand in hand (Salahu,2017). In African traditional societies, social and political life of people was shaped through their African traditional religion. The traditional rulers were agents of the gods of the land and are custodians of the ancestors. The people on their parts humbly and willingly accepted the socio-cultural and political arrangements concerning their lives as religious obligation (Onaiyekan,1993, Salahu,2017).

It is necessary to clarify some key concepts which will be in constant use in this study, and may cause confusion if not immediately clarified are "ethnicity", "religion", "politics", and "behaviour/conduct", as to enrich the knowledge and understanding of the issues being discussed. This becomes even more imperative given that there is no universally acceptable definition of variables

under investigation, so as to come out of this “Conceptual dilemma”. (a) *Ethnicity*: is a group of people or sub group made of people who share a common language, common descent, history or cultural background. (b) *Religion*: may be defined as belief, values, and action of ultimate concern. The concept of ultimate concern, as developed by Paul Tillich and by Robert Bellah, has two aspects: meaning and power- “meaning in the sense of a society or a sub-group of it, and power, in the sense of ultimate, sacred, or supernatural power which stands behind those values (Bellah in Vogt and Albert,1966)”. (c) *Politics*: Are whatever enters significantly into the structure and processes of what is generally called the civil state: governmental levels, official administration, legislatures and law-making part is a politics, elections administration, pressure groups and lobbying. Also in the same vein, politics is view from the “authoritative allocation of values” or “who gets what, when and how” (Easton,1957, Lasswell,1930). (d) *Behaviour/Conduct*: Man’s actions taken collectively makeup his behaviour or conduct. But behaviour is more of a psychological word, whereas conduct has an ethical meaning is exclusively human (see Fagothey,1976). That distinction made however, let the reader note that the two terms will be used interchangeably to means man’s actions taken collectively.

Today, Nigeria is troubled by several internal issues due to its historical political divide and decisions made during its early formative years by the formal colonial leadership, and it’s devastating effect on the competing religious and ethnic formations (Mac. Alim, 2011). With the Muslim majority north and Christian majority south diverse group and the growth in ethno-religious strife, the Nigerian government must take extraordinary strategy to address the problems that will correct the future (Weatherstone,2012). The discourse on the correlation between religion and politics is therefore an inevitable and important one. The call for separation of politics from ethno-religious often is a mere assumption. The reality is that both are tied together, by the very nature of things and this for at least two reasons. Firstly, there is something inherently sacred about political power. History has shown that power can only be properly exercised when handled with sacred attention. In religious and cultural parlance, we say, all powers belong to God (ancestors). Secondly, it is the same people who assumes both ethno-religious and political identify, and one necessarily effects the other (Onaiyeken,1993, Salahu, 2017, Easton 1957, Lasswell,1930). In light of the above, this paper in tend to interrogate the influence of ethno-religious on politics in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The aim of the review is to assess pertinent literature with respect to the dominant themes under investigation. If “ethno-religious has always been a very powerful factor in human life” (Amadi,1982), nowhere is much so than in Africa, and the area now known as Nigeria in particular.

Intersection Between Ethno-Religious and Politics: In Nigeria, ethno-religious has been an integral part of societies and has significantly had impact on political transformations throughout history. Ethno-religious has always played and will continue to play enormous role in the political process in Nigeria and Africa in general. Ethno-religious movements, for instance, have, at different times, effected political and social change by mobilizing communities and advocating for political reforms. Elphick and Davenport (1997) has observed that;

Religions movement have frequently been at therefore front of political resistance liberation struggles in Africa. Religious leaders, motivated by their spiritual convictions, have mobilized their followers to challenge colonialism, fight for independence, and advocate for social justice and human right. One notable example is the role of clerics during the anti-apartheid struggle in South-Africa. Figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Reverend Frank Chika utilized their religious platforms to condemn the oppressive regime and advocate for equality. Their moral authority and involvement in politics activism influenced both local and international perceptions, ultimately contributing to the fall of apartheid in South-Africa.

Also in Nigeria, traditional and religious leaders have been at there fore front of calls for political change. According to Achimefu (2013), said in 2012, a group of Christian and Muslim leaders formed the National Peace Committee to mediate the political crisis that was unfolding in the country. The committee was successful in brokering a deal between the government and the opposition, and it

helped to prevent a civil war. Ndukwe and Iheaka (2023), discussing the 2023 Nigerian general elections, recalls that; Many have argued that since Nigeria is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country and in order to avert an ethno-religious marginalization, a Christian south or a practitioner of another Faith other than Islam north, should be elected as the President of Nigeria come 2023. Furthermore, there are those who believe that Christians south have suffered more marginalization in the present Buhari administration than the previous administrations and so should be allowed to accede to power with a view to correcting the imbalance.

Jamiu (2012), exploring further the nexus between ethno-religious and politics, argues that, the political development under the banner of federalism, requires that the government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion or cultural as state religion, individuals, groups or even government officials should perform and function within the realm of ethno-religious in Force, be it atheism, Christianity or Islam. This is to say that the spirit of the constitution of Nigeria does not favours religion of any kind what the law of the land objects to is an attempt by either the Federal or State government to adopt any religion formation or group as the state religion. However, in reality, what is obtainable in some states in Nigeria today is an unofficial adoption of either some ethnic group domination, Islam or Christianity as either state language or religion, to the extent that individuals in some states are denied certain social and political rights, just because they belong to the “minority” ethnic or religious group. Notably, as observed by Jamiu (2012), neither the Jama’at Nasril (JNI) nor the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), before then was conscious or ready to express its awareness of any implication of government decision or its ethno-religious principle or practices. Within this period, some events started craving the indulgence of these religious and cultural organizations to rise to their feet and safeguard the interest of their religious and ethnic group politically.

However, there are those who believe that religion has brought about anti-democratic processes in a way that are questioning and demeaning. In relation to election, ethno-religious seems to have sometimes played a negative role that does not resonate with religious tenant. The political class are accused of arousing religious sentiments to a mass votes while the electorates vote along religious and ethnic lines. It should be noted that the situation is not different from what was obtainable during the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria, with APC fielding General Muhamadu Buhari, a Northern Muslim and Professor Yemi Osinbajo Southern Christian as the Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates respectively. The same could be said of their major opposition party PDP, where the Presidential Flag-bearer Goodluck Jonathan and Vice-President Namadi Sambo, who also rode on a “Christian–Muslim ticket” (Salahu,2017). It has always been the “Electoral-talisman”, when it comes to winning election in Nigeria. As such, this type of political development does confirm the fact that the impact of religion on Nigerian body politics, and by extension, on the outcome of elections in the country appears and remains unquestionable (Salahu,2017). However, the 2023 General election was a departure from the previous tradition of flying either a “Muslim–Christian ticket” or “Christian-Muslim ticket”, that was the initial norm among the major political parties. Daringly one of the major political party, the All-Progressive Congress, the party in power, again stall call and warnings from religious stake holders across the country ran on a “Muslim–Muslim tickets,” while the other opposition Political parties ran on a “Christian–Muslim tickets” respectively. A development which heated the polity so much, leading to the Christian groups openly challenging the party and its candidate and even threatened to vote against the party. According to Adiola Aderomu (2006) as cited in Ayuba (2012); one of the most disturbing issues in the unification of Nigeria are ethnicity and religion. Ake (1995), Jega (2002) and Jinaid (2001) argues, the close interaction between Nigeria state and ethno-religious and faith-based organization reflects, the wide spread perception that Nigeria is not a secular state in practice.

Religious and ethnic politics do not affect the state in a coherent or uniform ways, instead having a complex and even contradictory impact on the state and its institutions (Love,2006, Philipoot,2007, as cited in Ayuba,2012). In the 21st century, the role of ethno-religious in the political arena affects not only elections, public policy, political decision-making at the domestic level but all so international relations and global strategies. One example is the influence of ethno-religious dynamics in the Middle East,

where the Sunni-Shite Split between Saudi Arabia and Iran influence their foreign policies and led to proxy conflicts in countries such as Yemen and Syria, thus impacting global geopolitical strategies (Benitoetal,2022; Tsourapes,2021). Ethno-religious considerations can strengthen transnational solidarity as well as fueling conflict and divisions. Conversely, politics can intensify ethno-religious integration in society or result in the marginalization of certain religious and ethnic groups, depending on the political context and the agenda leaders embrace. Therefore, it is essential to understand how these variables influence each other in various political and ethno-religious scenarios.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on “social identify theory” in explaining how individuals or groups derive part of their identity from their religious affiliation, leading them to favour political actors and policies that align with their religious and ethnic groups interests. This can manifest in various ways, such as voting for ethnic and religiously aligned parties or advocating for policies that reflect ethnic and religious values (Tajfel and Turner,1986). The advocates of social identity theory provide a framework for explaining intergroup behaviour and intergroup communication based on the inherent value humans placed on social group (religious/ethnicity) memberships, and their desire to view their specific social groups in positive light. This theory demonstrated how people’s apparently inherent desire to distinguish themselves from others based on their willingness to sacrifice absolute levels of rewards to maintain relative superiority over members of other groups. This theory is adequate for this study because it explains how ethno-religious influence our voting behaviour and also change our policies decision in Nigeria.

Methodology

In carrying out this study, the research hypothesized that the ethno-religious has a great influence on politics in Nigeria. In doing this, the paper adopts ex-post-factor research design. Data for analytical purposes are extracted through documentary method. Table and logical induction were employed to help us interpret facts derived from secondary or documentary materials. This approach is primarily linked to contextual analysis of the information that is currently available about the subject under investigation. It includes reading, classification, coding, interpreting, analyzing, critiquing and discussing pertinent data acquired from the various sources, used to draw conclusions (Corbin and Strauss, 1999, McNabb,2015). Also as pointed out in Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2006;27-9), the technique “is geared towards the development of explanatory model based on issues that emerge or find out how ethno-religious intergroup membership identities behaviour influence politics in Nigeria.”

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

For the purpose of this study, we present the 2023 Nigeria Presidential election results as published by Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), tabulating these results from the six geo-political zones for easy analysis. As such, the state’s result shall be placed under their respective geo-political zones. It is equally important to note that, for the purpose of this study, we are interested in the results of the three major political parties, namely; All Progressive Congress (APC), People Democratic Party (PDP) and Labour Party (LP), since it was virtually a contest among the three parties. Although eighteen political party register and participated in the election process, but it is interested to note that out of the 24,025,940 total votes cast during the last elections, 21,880,799 votes were shared among these three major political parties namely, APC, PDP, and LP respectively, which represents 91.1%, while other fifteen parties hared 2,145,161 votes which constitutes 8.9% percent (INEC,2023).

TABLE: 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS OF THE THREE MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES VIZ; APC, PDP AND LP

S/N	Geo-political Zone	State	APC (votes)	PDP(Vote)	LP(Vote)
1	North-West	Kano	517,341	131,716	28,513
2	"	Kaduna	399,293	554,360	294,494
3	"	Katsina	482,282	489,045	6,376
4	"	Kebbi	248,088	285,175	10,682
5	"	Jigawa	421,390	386,583	1,889
6	"	Sokoto	285,444	288,679	6,568
7	"	Zamfara	298,396	193,978	1,660
	sub-total(votes)		2,652,235	2,3929,536	
8	North-East-	Banchi	316,694	426,607	27,373
9	"	Yobe	151,459	198,567	2,406
10	"	Gombe	14,977	319,123	26,160
11	"	Adamawa	182,881	417,611	105,648
12	"	Taraba	135,165	189,017	146,315
13	"	Borno	252,282	190,521	7,205
	sub-total(votes)		1,185,438	1,741,446	315,107
14	North-Central	Benue	310,468	130,081	30,637
15	"	Kogi	240,751	145,104	56,217
16	"	Kwara	263,572	136,909	31,217
17	"	Niger	375,183	284,898	80,452
18	"	Plateau	307,196	243,808	466,272
19	"	Nasaraw	172,922	147,093	191,361
20	"	FCT	90,902	74,194	281,717
	sub-total(votes)		1,760,994	1,162,087	1,137,822
21	South-West	Lagos	572,606	75,750	582,454
22	"	Oyo	449,884	182,977	99,110
23	"	Osun	343,45	354,366	23,283
24	"	Ondo	369,524	175,463	44,405
25	"	Ekiti	201,494	89,554	11,397
26	"	Ogun	341,554	123,831	85,829
	sub-total(votes)		2,279,007	1,001,941	846,478
27	South-East	Imo	66,406	39,234	360,495
28	"	Enugu	4,772	15,749	428,640
29	"	Anambr	5,111	9,036	584,621
30	"	Ebonyi	42,402	13,503	259,738
31	"	Abia	8,914	22,676	327,095
	sub-total(votes)		127,605	91,198	1,760,589
32	South-South	Akwalbo	160,620	214,012	132,683
33	"	Bayelsa	42,572	68,818	49,975
34	"	Rivers	231,591	88,468	175,071
35	"	CrossRiver	130,520	95,425	179,17
36	"	Edo	144,471	89,585	331,163
37	"	Delta	90,186	161,600	341,866
	sub-total(votes)		799,960	717,908	1,210,676
	Total(validvotes)		8,794,726	6,984,520	6,101,533

Source: Generated from the INEC database (2023) presidential election result as cited in Salahu, M.O,2023.

In addition to the above presented data, it is also critically and important to run a brief background check of the voting behaviour of voters considering the description of the distribution of ethno-religious factors in the country with regards to the six geopolitical zones. Note that Nigeria is unequally divided between Christian majority south and Muslim majority North. The majority of the Nigerian Muslim are concentrated in the Northern part of the country, while Christian dominates in the southern part of the country. Muslims form a slight majority in country population, comprising 50.8% of the general population, while Christian population makeup 47.9%. According to the 2001 (IA Fact book and other sources 50% of the population is Muslim, 40% Christian and 10% follows traditional believers. However, or whichever report we choose to adopt, one thing is clear, from the 2023 general election results across the six geopolitical zones, the spread of the election results is influenced by either ethnicity or religious dominated behaviour for voting candidate of their ethnic or religious affiliation be it in the Northern or Southern part of the country. From the aforementioned, it is clear that ethno-religious factors have played a negative role in Nigeria political development be it in the public policy formulations and voters' voting behaviour in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, (Salahu,2023). As supported by Identity capital, which refers to the use of identity as an asset in achieving a set goals are used by ethnic or religious groups to advance their activism or agitation (Atata and Omobowake, 2022). Based on the above assumption, it's clear on this note that ethno-religious identity influence politics in Nigeria

Possible Way Forward

This study believes that the following indicators and factors will help to bridge the inequality among citizens and contributes positively in the fore seeable future in Nigeria; (a) *Encourage Good and accountable leadership*: It is obvious that one of the banes of Nigerian social and economic transformation is poor leadership. This led Achebe (1983) to assert that "the problem with Nigeria is simply a failure of leadership". And he further buttressed that religion and traditional leadership have a responsibility to rise to the challenge of addressing the scarcity of credible leadership in Nigeria so as to be able to engender sustainable transformational development. (b) *Religious and traditional leaders should avoid Paley with politicians*: The Paley between religious and traditional leaders with politicians has been criticized in many forums, they are often seen as being too closely aligned with the government or the opposition and it makes it difficult for them to maintain their credibility and to build trust with the people. It is, therefore, incumbent on the religious and traditional leaders to focus on people, develop and inspire trust, have as a long-term perspective, show originality and challenge the status quo and of course, dissociate themselves from the political class. (c) *Re-orientation of the religious and cultural ideology*: Nigerian ethnic/religious leaders as well as the political leaders should be reminded that they are not simply (spiritual or) political leaders, but they are also divine symbol of their people's health and well-being. Both the traditional and religious leadership ideology should be re-oriented towards the well-being of the Nigerian populace, who find themselves engulfed in poverty and deplorable living conditions.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined the link between religion and politics, particularly on how the ethno-religious influences political behaviour in Nigeria. Ethno-religious is a means by which people find meaning in political ultimate and spiritual sense. However, in a country like Nigeria, our findings have shown that ethno-religious which is supposed to take an apolitical, or play a non-partisan role leading to the development of the human person and society in general have become bastardized and politicized, As the case of future general elections, there are growing fear among disillusioned patriots and intellectuals that ethno-religious factors might again be politicized and used to advance the selfish interests of power brokers both in the political ambiances. This paper in clear terms, based on the outcome of our analysis, has been able to establish and affirms that voters have demonstrated the voting behaviour base on ethnic and religious line across the entire thirty-six states in Nigeria.

For the country to witness any meaningful socio-economic development, this study recommends that both religious and traditional leaders need to deal with internal divisions within their own communities and also use their moral authority to speak out against injustice and corruptions, so as to allow our democracy grow far above ethno-religious diversities plaguing Nigeria as a country. Lastly, there is the need for government agencies to collaborate and enforce legal action against any individuals or groups that promote “ethno-religious tendency in politics. This would serve as a deterrent to those ethno-religious bigots, who pre-occupy themselves with promoting ethno-religious-laden hate speech” especially in critical political period in Nigeria.

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