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EFFECTS OF RELIGION ON POLITICAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Religion plays vital role in Nigeria political process and has taken a position of importance. Religion is a belief in a reality beyond what is perceptible by the sense and the practices associated with the belief. The study analyzes the effects of religion on political process in Nigeria. The study uses secondary data predominantly to explore how religion influenced the sustainability of political process in the area of peace building and harmony in Nigeria. The paper concludes that religion has been used and still being used to achieve political interests which has resulted in stunted growth of the process and its sustainability; it has plausible impact on political process in Nigeria especially on the reorientation of the core values of religion in peace building, National coexistence, credible, free and fair elections. Therefore, the study recommends that the practice of plurality of religion in Nigeria should be geared towards attaining the sustainability of the process. Thus, government should give more power to the National Religious Advisory Board and the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council in promoting inter-religious dialogue and religious tolerance through organized seminars and workshops for religious adherents to help in building and sustaining the political process.

Keywords: Analysis, Effects, Religion, Politics, Nigeria

Introduction

Historically, religion has proven to be the principal force behind the sustainability of political process in the World. Religion plays vital role in Nigeria political process and has taken a position of importance. Religion is not a phenomenon of recent emergence. Its beginning is unknown. It is dateless. Religion and politics are interconnected and intertwined. Religion is a belief in a reality beyond what is perceptible by the senses, and the practices associated with the belief. Disciples are motivated by religious teachings, ethics and beliefs to develop spiritual qualities that empower them to sacrifice for others and to contribute to the development of their society. Religion and politics are inextricably linked such that the former exert strong influence on the later. Religion according to Agbiji and Swart (2015), constitutes the main structure of the black race, and is connected with their general existence, including their socio-political and economic development. Mbiti (1999) observed that religion has pervaded all aspects of human

life, to such an extent that it is not easy to separate man from it.

Religion has taken a position of importance in Nigerian politics. The nation is the most populous country in West Africa and vest with religious diversities: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. These religions are intertwined with political activities in the country. The political office holders are misusing religion as a tool to get to power while religious leaders are mishandling it to get personal gain from those who hold public office. Thus, religion has been mostly used negatively in Nigerian politics since independence.

There is an incontrovertible connection between religion and political process. While the actual role that religion plays in politics has remained debatable, the nexus between the two concepts has been established for long. Religion does not make people good or bad. On the contrary, it is being used as an instrument of oppression

and deceit in Nigeria. It appears that Nigerians have resigned themselves to fate and this is possibly further compounded by poverty, illiteracy, and lack of political education on the part of majority. This position is further aggravated by the general perception that politics is a dirty game and that only people who can deceive, manipulate, and greedily accumulate wealth are meant to participate. The number of religious people in Nigeria run into million, yet the level of insecurity, destruction of lives and properties and crimes committed in God's name is overwhelming. The need for political stability in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. A major variable in the Nigerian polity is the relationship between religion and politics which some consider as inseparable, while some support the notion of the separation of religion from politics, so that the former will not imbibe the corruption inherent in the latter (Van der Veer, 1996).

Generally speaking, there is a common fallacy that religion and politics are two different fields of social activity. This leads observers sometimes to speak of the politicization of religion, and aver that it is against the original intent of the founder of religion, or God himself. All over the country, religion plays an important role in the daily lives of her citizens; the way we interact with one other, our choice of dressing, food, and politics are mostly affected by religion. In other words, religion and politics are intertwined and it empowers man to function in his society by contesting for a political position so as to contribute his ideology. Nigeria's population of over 210 million is divided nearly equally between Christians and Muslims. The importance of this division is well illustrated by the fact that religion, not nationality, is the way in which most Nigerians choose to identify themselves; though not in all cases. Thus, the domains of religion, secularism and politics are becoming increasingly intermingled in both overt and covert ways. Invariably, sectarian politics is inherently problematic (Tar & Shettima, 2010).

It is important to note that religion possesses great functional value and, as a dimension of human life, it is believed to have been present since time immemorial. Hence, it is glaring that people attached strong significance to religion which could not do without

religion regardless the faith an individual is attached to. In addition, religion stimulates man to control his environment by struggling for power, so as to achieve his objective(s). In a nutshell, religion empowers man to pursue political power and other forms of power that can make him to have firm control of his environment. The access to the powers which religion gives to man makes religion inseparable from politics. In survey a conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life from May to June 2006 explained that 76% of Christians say that religion is more important to them than their identity as Africans, Nigerians or members of an ethnic group. Among Muslims, the figure that chose religion as their most important factor stood at 91%, this shows the power inherent in religion and the value people place on it (Ruby & Shah, 2007).

Adherence to religious tenets by the leaders and followers will greatly enrich political activity. Embedded in each religion are the beliefs, practices and ethics that serve as check for excesses in human behaviour. Thus, values in religion are viable mechanisms for political stability and development. In addition, religion can function as a unifying factor for political development, since religion influences every aspect of human lives and serves as a basis for human existence. Religion can boost inter-religious dialogue which can ultimately bring about religious tolerance in the society. Inter-religious dialogue is a platform where religious leaders discuss and orientate people about the essence of religion and its efficacy in the society. Hence, it is important for religious leaders to guide against hypocritical teaching that can disrupt peace and political stability. Therefore, exchange of ideas removes ignorance and eliminates religious conflicts. The observance of the oath of office by the political leaders will sustain political development. Political office holders should allow their religious tenets to guide them continuously. Thus, there is a need to look at the effect of religion on political process in Nigeria.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework Religion

Religion, unlike other disciplines has no universally acceptable and satisfactory definition. Religion is conceived in different perspectives based on the context it is understood. Durkheim (1912) first published defined

Religion in terms of a distinction between the sacred and the profane. A common approach to a substantive definition of religion is to define it in terms of supernatural belief. Thus, Robertson (1970) states that religion “refers to the existence of supernatural beings that have a governing effect on life”. A supernatural element is combined with the institutional aspect of religion.

Religion is an elusive and imprecise concept. It is difficult to define with precision and objectivity because it is emotion-laden (Egwu, 2011, Agarwal et.al 1994); Religion has been variously defined as a body of truths, laws and rites by which a man is subordinated to transcendent being (Adeniyi 1993). To Bellah (1970) religion denotes a set of symbolic forms and actions that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence. Drawing similar concern, Peter (1988) conceptualized religion as system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting mood and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Many scholars such as Goody (1961) and Horton (1960) agree that the notion of ‘sacred’ at once indicates the idea of the transcendent in the concept of religion and they both go further to underline the fact that the ‘sensuous religions’ in a distinct type of experience that is essentially characterized by a feeling of mystery and awe. Mc-Henry (cited in Ayinla, 2003) understands religion as a particular system or set of systems in which doctrines, myths, rituals, sentiments and other similar elements are interrelated. Peter (1998) sees it as a system of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. In his view, Durkheim defined religion as ‘unified systems of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. According to him, religion involves a set of beliefs and practices that are uniquely different from other social institutions and ways of thinking (Fawole & Bello, 2011). In a broader

perspective, religion can be understood in two related, yet distinct ways, material and spiritual. From the material perspective, it is conceived as religious establishments (i.e. institutions and officials) as well as social groups and religious concerns. On the other hand, in the spiritual perspective, religion is concerned with models of social and individual behavior that help believers to organize their everyday lives. It is in this way that religion is characterized as transcendence, supernatural realities and sacred (Alanamu, 2004).

In this context, religion can be seen as people’s belief system as regard material and spiritual or nonmaterial things. This belief system determines how they relate and perceive the universe and its components (such as humans, air, water, food, animals and other natural bodies).

Politics

Although politics is a universal phenomenon, there is no unanimous definition that incorporates all that constitutes politics. According to Soanes and Stevenson (2009), the term “politics” means the activities associated with the governance of a country or area. This involves beliefs, theories or principles concerning or inherent in activities of governance, power and status in society. One may characterize “political” activities, expressions, institutions, and practices that are concerned with governance and “politicization” as causing things or situations to be political. The idea of what is known as politics was derived from the Greek term “polis”, which means city state. The formation of city-states was mainly aimed at aiding political activities. The political activities in city-states were focused on answering pertinent questions of governance, which include: who should rule? And what should be the nature and limit of the government’s power? Mondin (2014) emphasizes that the polis became an all-comprehensive horizon of fundamental value to man in society.

Ogugua and Ogugua (2015), see politics as control and exercising of power. Though, the very old definition of politics was seen as a process of deciding who gets what, when and how. The definition remains relevant even in the literature. Marxist view sees politics as a class struggle

arising as a result of class striving for control of power in the society (Oluwatusin & Daisi, 2018). Politics involves a human relationship that involves control and influence. Though the opinion expressed by various scholars may exhibit divergence in all the definition, there is a commonality in respect to the fact that politics involves the exercise of power. In this study, there are diverse approaches towards defining politics in human history, yet most common conviction is its search for the realization of the well-being of society. Politics took as its subject matter how best to govern the society. Therefore, politics is an organized social formation which governs human society and its civil endeavours. It is a process or system through which a state or its government seeks to meet both the civil and moral common good of citizens.

Theoretical Framework

This study is positioned within the Social identity theory. Social identity theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. The theory was originally developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. According to this theory, identity competition plays a central role in the inception and escalation of intergroup conflict, even when economic and political factors also are at play. Individual and group identity competition is considered a by-product of individuals' efforts to satisfy basic human needs, including various psychological needs. Religions often serve these psychological needs more comprehensively and potently than other repositories of cultural meaning that contribute to the construction and maintenance of individual and group identities. Religions frequently supply cosmologies, moral frameworks, institutions, rituals, traditions, and other identity-supporting content that answers to individuals' needs for psychological stability in the form of a predictable world, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and even self-actualization. The peculiar ability of religion to serve the human identity impulse thus may partially explain why intergroup conflict so frequently occurs along religious fault lines.

According McLeod (2008) to Henri Tajfel's greatest contribution to psychology was social identity theory. Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership. An individual draws self-

esteem, self-worth and pride from his membership of groups like family, social club, race, college attended, profession, etc. In this theory group membership bestows sense of belonging on the individuals. Tajfel (1979) proposed that the groups (e.g. social class, family, football team, etc.) which people belonged to were an important source of pride and self-esteem. Groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world. We attempt to advance the rating of our group in order to increase our self-worth.

For example, England is the best country in the world! We can also increase our self-image by discriminating and holding prejudice views against the out group (the group we don't belong to). For example, the Americans, French etc. are a bunch of losers! Therefore, we divided the world into "them" and "us" based through a process of social categorization (i.e. we put people into social groups). This is known as in-group (us) and out-group (them). Social identity theory states that the in-group will discriminate against the out-group to enhance their self-image (McLeod, 2008). There is a tendency to exaggerate the differences between groups and the similarities of things in the same group. The 'we and they' categorisation breeds prejudice as it seeks to reinforce in-group superiority by finding negative aspects of the out-group. This is the foundation for prejudice. Thus, McLeod (2008) stated that "Prejudiced views between cultures may result in racism; in its extreme forms, racism may result in genocide, such as occurred in Germany with the Jews, in Rwanda between the Hutus and Tutsis and, more recently, in the former Yugoslavia between the Bosnians and Serbs".

The process according to Tajfel and Turner (1979) involves social categorization, identification and comparison. We tend to lump or categorize people and ourselves into groups. This can be along lines of religion, race, ethnic origin, complexion, profession, etc. Once this is done we discover more positive things about our categories and tend to judge others by our standards. It is also possible for an individual to belong to several categories. Thus, a Christian can also be an Igbo and a Moslem can be a Fulani or Hausa. Closely following categorization is social identification. Here the individuals appropriate the identity of the group they

belong to and begin to act as they think worthy of the group. They struggle to conform to the norms, ethics, etc of the group. If we must maintain our self-esteem, we must then compare our group membership with others. Then comes the social comparison stage in the process. It is the product of this stage where the negative aspects of other groups as against the positive aspects of one's group that breed rivalry and even hostility. It is expected that this theory will help us to understand the place of politics of religion in Nigeria, especially given the constant rivalries among religions in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Effects of Religion on Political Process in Nigeria

In 1999 President Olusegun brought about the return of religious debate, especially on the Sharia law. His presidency was supposed to be recompense to the north for totally supporting him during the 1999 election. According to Kukah (2003), it was in 1979 that non-Muslims outside the north appeared to have heard of the Sharia for the first time. During the debate on the draft constitution for the new republic, members of the National Assembly stumbled on a clause in the draft which states as follows:

- i. There shall be a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal, which shall be an intermediate Court of Appeal between the States' Sharia Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Nigeria.
- ii. The Court shall be composed of a Grand Mufti and whatever number of Muftis (not less than three) the National Assembly shall prescribe.
- iii. In each State of the Federation that so desires there shall be a Sharia Court of Appeal to be established by the Constitution of the State".

With this understanding, Christians in the National Assembly were united in purpose to stand against the endorsement of Sharia law. Likewise, the Muslim members stood their ground to see it become law. After negotiations, a sub-committee was set up, which finally tabled a draft proposal for the members to consider. This draft was accepted and duly inserted in the proposed

constitution. It stated that, instead of having a separate Federal Sharia Court of Appeal, which might appear to be at par with the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court should comprise some members that are learned in Islamic law to hear appeals from State Sharia Courts of Appeal. Though, this proposal was accepted, later events revealed that religion has penetrated into Nigerian politics in a powerful way than ever before. The Muslims on one hand seem to have braced up to pursue the Sharia issue and to implement it in the entire Federation while Christians, on the other hand, were set on the alert and considered ways to foster solidarity among themselves in resistance to feared attempts at the Islamization of Nigeria. Finally, religion became a strong factor that could not be waved aside in policy making.

In addition, the debate on Sharia law led to schism. Many Muslim interpreted the constitutional provisions by focusing on the provision on freedom of religion. Many Christians, in contrast, focused on the provision that no State religion be adopted and feel that the introduction of Sharia law is unconstitutional, because it affects their religious freedom. With the introduction of Sharia law, some Christian groups have 'translated' the current Muslim debate into the realm of Christianity and demanded the introduction of (Christian) canon law in predominantly Christian States (Imo, 2008). Moreover, the implementation of Sharia law brought about religious unrest, violence and annihilation of Christians, especially in the States that adopted Sharia law. During Obasanjo's tenure, Christian-Muslim tensions deepened. Shortly after he assumed office in 1999, twelve states decided to apply Sharia to criminal cases, provoking considerable hostility from the Christians. At the same time, many Christian denominations stepped up evangelistic and missionary efforts in middle-belt and northern states thus, further heightened tensions. On this, Atubi (2007) remarks that the anti-Sharia demonstration by Christians on 21st February, 2000 led to a major conflict between the two groups, resulting in massive killings of people on both sides, the destruction of religious buildings, general arson, and destruction of property. The scale of the massacre and destruction was very high and thousands of people were reported to have been slaughtered like rams. The Kaduna conflict demonstrated the fundamental problem created

by the adoption of the Sharia legal system. There was insecurity of life among Christian minority groups in the state. Many people, on both sides, called for partition of Nigeria, rather than adoption and abandonment of the Sharia system. The Kaduna religious crises led to retaliatory killings and burning of Mosques in Abia and Owerri, in which Igbo youth targeted northerners who they accused of killing their kith in the North.

Since May 1992, over 10,000 people have died from communal-religious conflicts. Plateau, Benue, Taraba and Borno States constituted the highest figure of casualties. According to some accounts, more than 10,000 people have been killed in sectarian conflicts, primarily in Kaduna and Plateau States in the last seven years. Subsequently from 2001, incidents of Christian-Muslim violence have become more frequent and bloodier. Violence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria has claimed thousands of lives in the past decade. It flared again in February 2006 when Muslim were outraged at the caricatures of the prophet Muhammad which led to a massacre of dozens of Christians in the north, followed by reprisal killings of Muslims by Christians in the south. More than 150 people were killed and numerous churches and mosques destroyed.

Also, the effect of religion on political process has brought about people voting according to their faith regardless of the capacity of the candidate to lead the country. This was evident in the southeast. For instance, Catholic Priests in Anambra State openly enjoined their members to vote for Peter Obi (former governor) because of his religious inclination. According to him "he always clutched his chaplet tightly in his hands to demonstrate to the Catholic faithful that he was certainly one of them." And they accepted him (Okafor, 2011). Also, the former Peoples' Democratic Party's (PDP) senator for Jigawa northwest senatorial district, Dr Danladi Sankara decried an alleged religious undertone in the 2011 presidential election. Sankara, who was also the Jonathan/Sambo returning agent for Jigawa State in the election, indicated that there was connivance among the opposition parties in Jigawa, whereby they indoctrinated the people to vote for Muslims. The defunct Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) candidate, Gen. Muhammodu Buhari (rtd), scored

the highest vote in the 2011 presidential election in Jigawa State, polling 665,994 votes to beat his closest rival, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate, President Goodluck Ebelle Jonathan, who polled 419,252 votes. During the announcement of the result at the INEC headquarters in Dutse, the presidential election Collation Officer for the state, Prof. Jibrila D. Amin, the Vice Chancellor of the Federal University of Dutse, indicated that the total votes cast were 1,214,774, adding that the total valid votes were 1,140,766. According to him, Nigeria is governed by the constitution, not by any of the holy books, because party politics goes beyond religion and tribal consideration (Furtune News, 2011).

Although, Islam and Christianity have taken a clear position in the political life of Nigerians, it does not mean that African Traditional Religion is relegated to the background. Even Muslim and Christian politicians, privately and secretly consult the priests of the ATR, especially when it comes to political agreements and business contracts. However, ATR is not a strong factor in the fashioning of state policies and political programs.

The manipulation of religion by some powerful individuals who hide under the guise of religion to pursue selfish interests, and greediness of some religious leaders who patronize corrupt rulers remains part of the negative effects of religion on the polity. Greed has crept into the religious terrain to the extent that some religious leaders now patronize corrupt rulers to meet their lust for money and other material gains. Efforts by Nigerian politicians to gain ascendancy and power have led to situation in which politics have swept away sacred precepts of religion, and in the process, contaminated the hearts of people with bitterness and enmity for the religion of others. Hence, Falana (2010) quotes Bala Usman who says that the real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is the need to obscure from the people of Nigeria, a fundamental aspect of our reality; that is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed. And this is to enable this class to cover themselves with religious and ethnic disguises in order to further entrench division among our people, slow down their awakening at

any cost; even the unity of our country for which so much has been sacrificed.

On the other hand, the positive effect of religion on political process has brought about the reinvigoration of Christian reawakening to politics. In the 1999 elections, Pentecostal Christians openly supported Obasanjo's candidature under the banner of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), viewing him as a symbol of the restoration of Christian control over the government of Nigeria and of the "ending of Muslim political dominance" (Ojo, 2004). After Obasanjo was elected president, Pentecostal leaders conducted an all-night prayer meeting for him. This gesture was politically endorsed and rewarded with the construction of a chapel in the Presidential Villa, the seat of national politics. Obasanjo's victory at the polls and his eventual swearing-in as president on 29th May, 1999 was heavily steeped in Christian Pentecostal symbolism. A drama that was spectacularly replayed in subsequent elections testifies to this:

To many Christians, Obasanjo's "second coming" was a spiritual metaphor, one that went beyond the ordinary fact of his fortuitous emergence as a beneficiary of political compromise between the country's geo-political power blocs ... For Christians it was a fulfillment of God's promise to liberate his children (Southern Christians) from the yoke of northern (Muslim) leadership. A political exigent "second coming" was therefore invested with a spiritual halo, and Obasanjo himself became transformed into a virtual 'Messiah' almost overnight (Obadare, 2006:969). After the completion of two four-year terms and the abortive third term by President Olusegun Obasanjo, political leaders began talking of alternating the Presidency between the largely Christian south and predominately Muslim north. After considerable infighting and the disqualification of several would-be contenders, all of the country's major political parties chose Muslims as their candidates and after the controversial election, Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua emerged as the President. Though occult practices, cultism and superstitions which serve as a device among politicians to tussle for power becomes paramount.

Eso (2003) notes some incontrovertible facts pertinent to our religion-in-politics dilemma. According to him, "religion has a place in the lives of every nation, Nigeria included. Irrespective of the faith or denomination, religion when truly practiced in its truest form and spirit, has been and remains sacred. It plays a vital role in purposeful leadership, community building, social justice, law and order, peacemaking, reconciliation, forgiveness and the healing of wounds, be it political, family or personal". This means that if people truly make use of beliefs, values and attitudes inherent in religion into politics, it will bring about focused and resolute political leaders in the country who will be devoid of sanctimonious hypocritical attitude. It will also help in bringing about fair play into politics.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Religion has been used and still being used to achieve political interests which has resulted in stunted growth of the process and its sustainability; it has plausible impact on political process in Nigeria especially on the reorientation of the core values of Religion in peace building, National coexistence, credible, free and fair elections. Therefore, the paper recommends the following:

- i. That the practice of plurality of Religion in Nigeria should be geared towards attaining the sustainability of the process. The basis of gaining political power must be based on the ability to perform with good moral standard. It should not be based on religious identity.
- ii. Government should give more power to the National Religious Advisory Board and the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council in promoting inter-religious dialogue and religious tolerance through organized seminars and workshops for religious adherents to help in building and sustaining the political process.
- iii. Religious leaders should act as watchdogs to political office holders by guiding them against unacceptable practices that can jeopardize political development, not meddling with politics.

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